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ABSTRACT

This book presents summaries of 16 papers presented at a conference on increasing the amount and usefulness of research on alumni relations. Following an introductory paper, "On the Art and Science of Surveying Alumni" (Donna Shoemaker), the papers are: (1) "Targeted Research Gets Results. Comprehensive Research on Alumni Relationships: Four Years of Market Research at Stanford University" (Jerold Pearson); (2) "An Unvarnished Look: Evaluating Alumni Services and Planning Alumni Programs" (Diana Tilley Strange; William J. Hecht); (3) "Our Grads Are Doing Great! Uses of an Alumni Survey by Independent Colleges and Universities in Pennsylvania" (Michael D. McGuire; Jason P. Casey); (4) "A Model for Nurturing Students: What Makes a Difference? The Cornell Tradition Program" (Yuko Mulugetta; Scott Nash; Susan H. Murphy); (5) "How a Degree Rates in the Workplace: Building the Campus Impact of Assessment Through a Program of Linked Alumni and Employer Survey Research" (J. Joseph Hoey; Denise C. Gardner); (6) "If You Build It, Will They Come? The Heart of Campus: Alumni Facilities and the Impact on Alumni Giving and Programming" (Gene C. Crume; Jason Embry; Donald Smith); (7) "Testing Why Alumni Give: A Model of Alumni Gift-Giving Behavior" (J. Fredericks Volkwein; Kelli Parmley); (8) "The Data That Drive MIT's Success: Fund Raising from Alumni" (Joseph S. Collins; Diana Tilley Strange); (9) "Real-World Realities for Vets: Alumni as a Component of Assessment" (Dawn Geronimo Terkla; Kelli J. Armstrong); (10) "HEDS Up on Student Debt. Effective Alumni Surveys: A Tool for Addressing Institutional and National Concerns" (James F. Trainer; Melinda K. Ellis); (11) "Two States Benchmark Accountability: Conducting Alumni Research in and for State Higher Education Systems" (Marsha V. Krotseng; Darrell E. Glenn); (12) "Surf's Up on Satisfaction: Using Alumni Follow-Up to Assess Institutional Quality" (Larry H. Kelley); (13) "Super Cyber Surveys: Surveying and Reporting Alumni Data in the Information Age: The Case for Using the Web" (Nancy L. Ahson; Karen M. Gentemann); (14) "The Plight of Ph.Ds. Doctoral Graduates in Today's Employment Marketplace: Are They Really Driving Taxi Cabs?" (Nancy Garrett; Sandra H. Hoeflich); (15) "Would Alumni Do It All Again? Influences on Alumni Willingness to Attend the Same Institution, Select the Same Major, and Enter

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Report on
the 1998
Association for
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(AIR)/CASE
Alumni
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Conference

Research in Alumni Relations

Surveying Alumni to Improve Your Programs

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By Donna Shoemaker

CASE Books

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Report on the 1998 Association for Institutional Research (AIR)/CASE Alumni Research Conference

Research in Alumni Relations

Surveying Alumni to Improve Your Programs

By Donna Shoemaker

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Preface

This book evolved from an April 2-3, 1998, historic gathering of institutional researchers and alumni practitioners in Washington, DC. At this first-time conference, CASE and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) joined forces to generate ideas on how to increase the amount and usefulness of research and how this research involving alumni can help institutions better serve their graduates.

This book features the essence of the research in easy-to-read summaries, without the extensive statistical information in the original papers. The conference featured 12 sessions, each one presenting two of the 16 research papers. The organization of this book in general follows how the papers were paired in the 12 sessions. In each session, researchers discussed highlights of two of the papers, followed by comments from two respondents and then a Q&A discussion. Some of the 12 sessions were offered twice or featured different pairings of the papers, and so are condensed into the nine chapters here.

Whether you attended the conference or not, we believe this book offers a fresh perspective on gathering and interpreting the opinions of alumni. We hope you will find the summaries lively and informative, leaving you with new ideas to help you involve alumni in your institution.

—Nancy Raley
Director, CASE Books

On the Art and Science of Surveying Alumni

A guru once said that a successful research program needs two types of people: a "quantitoid" and a "gutician." The guticians have a good sense of what questions to ask. The quantitoids figure out how to ask the questions and then crunch the data and interpret it. You can't have one without the other.

Glancing around the meeting rooms at the first conference drawing together alumni relations professionals and institutional researchers, an observer might have concluded all too hastily which group could be dubbed the "guticians." As it turned out, participants had a terrific sense of what are the questions worth asking, and both groups left with plenty of questions to ask and to answer.

On April 2-3, 1998, as the two groups gathered, somewhat warily, they searched for where they might find common ground. Meeting for the historic AIR-CASE Alumni Research Conference, the 107 participants came to the sessions with the objective of understanding and improving an institution's relationship with its alumni.

Before they could unlock the data, however, they had to understand one another. Chances were that on a given campus, people who work in the alumni office and those who work in the institutional research (IR) office had never even met. Before the conference, if one had asked the alumni practitioners what "IR" meant, they would have replied, "institutional relations"—as in public affairs.

It was indeed an unusual first date. An observer could watch the two groups—the "doers" and the "researchers"—challenging one another's assumptions, exploring one another's perspectives, puzzling over one another's jargon, and then pledging their troth. The metaphor of marriage kept popping up during the conference, as two groups traditionally seated on opposite sides of the church aisle leaned across to assess their new in-laws. By the end of the sessions, the theme music being piped through the Georgetown University Conference Center might as well have been "Here Comes the Bride."

" The first and often gut response to just about any question today seems to be, 'Let's do a survey.' Perhaps this is a function of our information age, where information often is seen as readily available and cheaply acquired. After all, the nightly news can pose a question at the beginning of the broadcast and tell you how 'America' feels about that question by the end of the news. It all looks so easy."
—Nancy L. Ahson and Karen M. Gentemann, Institutional Assessment Office, George Mason University

The Association for Institutional Research (AIR), based at Florida State University, declares itself "dedicated to professional growth of all who participate in decision making related to higher education via management research, policy analysis and planning." Each May, it attracts about 1,300 people to its annual forum. Its members work in finance, academic affairs, instruction, student services, and institutional development, at the international, state, system, or campus levels. AIR participants came to this AIR/CASE conference having produced survey research papers for discussion, primarily focusing on using the opinions of alumni to feed back information to institutions in a variety of ways.

Many of the CASE alumni professionals present (far outnumbered by the IR contingent) were also members of the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE), an invitation-only group from large institutions.

"We're embarking on a rather grand experiment," said Larry Litten, director of research at the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE). He opened the conference by outlining how the meeting had come about and what its charge would be. Litten and Joseph Pettit, vice president for planning at Georgetown University, got the ball rolling on the conference when they decided to identify "cutting-edge" research in advancement. Their request for papers on alumni research eventually grew into something far more ambitious, Litten observed. Planning a big wedding is like that, it seems.

Coordinating plans from the AIR side of the aisle were Terrence Russell, executive director, and Mary Sapp, president. Shaping the CASE involvement were Eustace Theodore (even before he became president in October 1997) and Paul Chewning, vice president, professional development.

"Advancement must have a strong research base if we are to move forward," Theodore told participants. Now other CASE siblings are getting married with IR as well. The second AIR-CASE conference, on communications research, was held March 29-30, 1999. The third such conference, on fund-raising research, will be held in 2000. Then the three-year cycle will begin again in 2001 with alumni research—thus covering the three primary areas of interest to CASE professionals.

Registrants for the first conference received in advance a thick binder with copies of all 16 papers. The conference was set up so that participants could hear short presentations and discussions of eight of the 16 papers, selecting sessions they deemed most useful.

Most of the papers were oriented not toward the traditional territory of alumni relations but toward surveying alumni to provide feedback for student life, assessment, curriculum, accreditation, state mandates, and other purposes. Several papers described comparative studies across institutions; others focused on a single university, school, or program. Some also involved surveys of other groups, including employers of alumni or faculty and students. Paper 1 offered a remarkable range of targeted research projects of interest to alumni people; paper 6 explored the impact of building an alumni house on campus. Paper 7 outlined a model for research to be done.

This first AIR-CASE conference featured:

- 12 sessions over two days, with three sessions offered concurrently during each of four time periods;
- 16 papers, presented two to a session (several sessions were repeated, and a few papers were repeated but paired with a different paper the second time);
- responses from 24 alumni practitioners and other observers, with two responses per session;
- Question-and-answer discussions of about 45 minutes each at the end of each of the 12 sessions, during which audience members could ask questions of paper authors and respondents; and
- a plenary luncheon with five concluding commentaries.

This conference summary, commissioned by CASE, makes no attempt to do justice to the literature reviews, the statistical analysis, the extensive charts and plots and boxes integral to each paper. Its aims, rather, are:

- to distill from each paper practical applications for alumni professionals,
- to summarize succinctly the formal responses to each paper;
- to capture at least some of the flavor of the Q&A discussion;
- to weave together some of the common themes; and
- to highlight action steps resulting from the research.

Jossey-Bass has published some of the papers as part of its New Directions in Institutional Research series—whose editor-in-chief, J. Fredericks Volkwein, presented two papers at the conference.

> **"Last year, COFHE administered a survey of parents. Two things rose to the top: Parents wanted to know why the devil does college cost so much? And they wanted to know, what do the graduates do after college? What is someone who majored in French doing today? That's very easy to answer—we don't even need surveys. We need cooperation from the alumni houses. We need to take the databases sitting there at institutions and exploit them. You can help us, and we can help you."**
>
> —Joseph Pettit, Vice President for Planning, Georgetown University

Participants described the conference's qualitative aspects as a tango, a bridge, a dialogue, a conversation. Doers and researchers alike may have felt as if they needed translators for the language their new in-laws spoke: UBIT, LYBUNTS, relationship building, and warm fuzzies on one side of the aisle; SPSS, CATI, triangulation, and disaggregation on the other. The thought may have crossed more than one mind that—as Oberlin College once titled one of its student outcomes studies—"Torture Numbers Long Enough, and They'll Confess to Anything."

The institutional researchers especially learned, as one AIR member put it, "not to use the words alumni relations and fund raising interchangeably." Alumni practitioners acknowledged that, although gathering data "will never replace our gut notions and our creativity, it can inform that process." In the words of another practitioner, "Alumni directors tend to strike up partnerships with development, athletics, and career offices, but we haven't done a good job with institutional research. Being measured by how we use alumni for fund raising goes counter-culture to what a lot of alumni professionals believe."

For the alumni professionals, among the most important messages that emerged during the conference were the following:

- A considerable body of research already taps into the opinions of alumni. This research, however, is really only the beginning. There is a large lode of information yet to be mined.
- Studies of students are among the most revealing for alumni professionals.
- Researchers must be careful not to "overcommunicate" with alumni or to bore them with surveys that are too broad or too long.
- Finding out what is special about one's institution is worth every research penny one spends.
- The traditional staples of telephone and mail surveys now have been joined by a third method that is rapidly gaining ground for its timeliness, appeal, efficiency, and low cost: the World Wide Web.
- In adopting, where appropriate, a more rigorous approach to finding out what alumni think, alumni professionals need to apply what they learn to increase the effectiveness of their organizations and their institutions. Maximizing the information is key.
- The usefulness of any data dies quickly if left to gather dust on a shelf. Sharing information internally, externally, and across institutions is critical.
- Listening to the voice of alumni is invaluable for any institution.
- Conducting research with alumni groups is a commendable way to show graduates that their alma mater values their opinions, their ideas, and their input.
- Communicating the results of alumni research—even unfavorable findings—back to alumni is crucial.
- Studies of individual institutions/programs and comparative studies have value.
- In a time of rapid change and in the era of the electronic superhighway, alumni relations itself will be undergoing dramatic shifts, and a solid base of research can help smooth the transition.

Litten told participants that he hoped they would leave the conference saying, "Wow, I'd like to try that at home!" He wanted them to take back some new approaches and new programs, some "ideas that will be practical for you." The two groups were already talking about what the next steps should be in discovering exactly what research lies buried out there, in circulating future research, and in linking up with one another through print and electronic means.

"The fun thing about fund raising is that you can measure it. That's quantitative. You can't measure the feel-goods of the institution."
—Jason Embry, Director of Annual Giving, Centre College

In the end, the alumni practitioners and the institutional researchers still spoke distinct dialects, but they found common concerns about gathering, interpreting, and making judicious use of surveys of alumni. As they actively engaged in the conference's objective, they could see that a long-lasting marriage takes careful and caring communication, a cooperative spirit, a commitment to common goals—and even a dictionary.

—Donna Shoemaker
Editor

CHAPTER 1

Paper 1

What fund-raising messages fall flat with Stanford alumni? How effective are Stanford's printed materials? What do alumni want online? In doing eight or nine targeted studies a year, Jerold Pearson's market research shop at Stanford demonstrates the value of ongoing research that produces actionable results, not just descriptive data.

Targeted Research Gets Results

Comprehensive Research on Alumni Relationships: Four Years of Market Research at Stanford University

Jerold Pearson
Director of Market Research
Stanford University

Initial Research with Undergraduate Alumni

Considerable thought has been given to understanding the reasons why alumni make gifts to their alma mater. Because only 25 percent of undergraduate degree holders made a gift to Stanford's annual fund in 1993, my first study (Spring 1994) explored why most alumni do *not* make gifts. The decision to give is like a purchase decision: Just as a consumer makes an active decision to buy a

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Portions of this paper have been published previously in Pettit, J. and Litten, L., eds. *A New Era of Alumni Research: Improving Institutional Performance and Better Serving Alumni.* New Directions in Institutional Research, Number 101. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

different product for specific reasons, so too does he or she make an active decision for specific reasons to *not* buy a different product (even if those reasons are emotional or based on misperceptions). Someone who decides a buy a Toyota has also decided for specific reasons not to buy a Ford.

This first study measured various aspects of awareness, perceptions, and attitudes; it also tested a wide range of fund-raising messages. We used six focus groups, and a telephone survey of 642 randomly selected undergraduate degree holders.

Factors that Influence Giving. Our study confirmed that the overall alumni relationship plays a paramount role in the gift-making decision. The stronger the relationship, the more likely one is to be a donor. Stanford alumni were more likely to be donors:

- if they were very satisfied with their student experience,
- if they were involved and engaged with the university as alumni, and
- if they were kept informed of positive developments and what's happening at the university.

Just as important, the study also showed that these areas are *interdependent:* Alumni who are most satisfied with their student experience are the most likely to remain engaged with the university; alumni who are most engaged are the most likely to read communications from the university; and those who are most informed about the university are the most likely to remain engaged with it.

Fund raisers have long thought in terms of relationship building, but our research clearly demonstrated the importance of the overall relationship the university has with alumni, not just the relationship the development office has with donors. In short, the solicitation is the last event in a long chain of events, and the decision to give (or not to give) is influenced by many things that occur long before the solicitation arrives. The correlations strongly indicated that fund-raising efforts will be more successful if student affairs, alumni relations, university communications, and development professionals all work closely with one another. While this may seem obvious, it sent a very strong message to Stanford, where the university had little role in alumni relations (because of an independent alumni association) and where development had little say in university communications. Supported by the strong evidence provided by the research, the university and the Alumni Association have since merged, and development has obtained a stronger voice in communications and alumni relations.

The relationship alumni have with the university begins with their experience as students. Not surprisingly, satisfaction with the student experience was the single most essential precondition for giving. Fortunately for Stanford, however, almost all alumni (97 percent) said they were satisfied with their student experience, and more than 75 percent said they were *very* satisfied.

One can be satisfied (and even very satisfied) with one's alma mater and still not make a gift to it. Giving, our study found, also was influenced by the quality of alumni relations and communications, the perceived needs of the institution, and the messages conveyed in solicitations—not to mention the methods used and the resources invested in fund raising. Very satisfied alumni:

- have a strong personal commitment to Stanford,
- perceive the value of their Stanford education as greater than the education they could have

gotten elsewhere,
- take greater pride in their Stanford degree, and
- are more likely to be donors.

Satisfaction was greater among alumni who felt that the best features of their education were *deliberately* provided by Stanford (for example, the advising they received).

The second component of the alumni relationship is the degree to which alumni are engaged with and involved in the life of the university. Almost every such measure in the survey indicated that the relationship alumni had with Stanford faltered badly in this respect.

Although this finding identified a major challenge that Stanford must address, it came with a silver lining. Anecdotal information had caused serious concern that many alumni withhold gifts because they are angry at Stanford for social and political reasons. However, the data from the survey strongly indicated—as has every subsequent survey—that, with the exception of a small (older) minority, this concern was simply unfounded. Most alumni were profoundly disengaged from—*not* disaffected with—Stanford.

Indeed, most alumni had positive feelings about Stanford. As the focus groups revealed, most of the alumni who had doubts were eager to be reassured that things were on the right track. Even the crankiest and most skeptical alumni appreciate that the world is changing, and they recognize that the university must change with it. What they want, however, is reason to believe that change is being *managed* in a thoughtful and judicious fashion, that the university has a clear direction and is not just blown by social and political winds. This insight helps explain why the data demonstrated that the more alumni knew about the Stanford president's goals and priorities, the more favorable their perceptions of the university were and the more likely they were to be donors.

The importance of communicating effectively with alumni cannot be overstated. The study revealed several concerns in this area:

- Alumni were frustrated with communications they regarded as random, redundant, not salient to their interests, and not written from an alumni perspective.
- Readership of the main alumni newspaper was moderate, at best.
- Most alumni had little awareness of Stanford *as it is now* or the issues the university would consider most important to its future.

Nevertheless, alumni do form perceptions of Stanford—but, to a great extent, those perceptions were formed more from vague impressions gleaned from outside sources than from information provided by the university. This is far from ideal: Like any successfully marketed product or program, a university must define itself to its audience rather than allow itself to be defined by others. Indeed, alumni who were most informed about Stanford *from Stanford sources* had more positive perceptions of it and were more likely to be donors.

Our research suggested that Stanford would benefit from a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to ensure that communications with alumni are:

- strategically timed rather than occasional and fortuitous;
- designed to articulate clearly defined, consistent messages;
- developed with alumni interests clearly in mind; and

- informed by overarching objectives.

Fund-raising messages that didn't work. We found that three fund-raising messages being used at the time simply fell flat with most Stanford alumni:

- "Tuition does not cover the cost of a Stanford education." In fact, this message did more to raise negative questions about increasing costs than it did to engender feelings of gratitude or indebtedness.
- "Support Stanford so it can continue to provide the great teaching and wonderful classes that you benefited from." To the contrary, many younger alumni (accurately or not) recalled a much different experience—with large classes, little access to faculty, and too many teaching assistants.
- "Alumni have an obligation to Stanford." Most alumni did *not* believe they have such an obligation (and resented suggestions that they do).

Alumni make gifts to give something back. Our study showed that alumni did feel Stanford had a positive impact on their lives. The main reason they considered making gifts is simply to give something back. Stanford also must demonstrate, however, that what they give back will be meaningful. The most persuasive messages demonstrated the *impact* of alumni gifts on individuals (through financial aid), on the university (by helping to fund teaching initiatives and new programs), and on the world we live in (because Stanford is a positive social force as a leader in science, the humanities, medicine, and technology).

For most alumni, the single greatest deterrent to making a gift to Stanford is that they felt Stanford simply didn't need their gifts as much as other organizations and causes do. They perceived Stanford to be a wealthy institution with other generous sources to rely upon (such as well-to-do alumni, corporations, and foundations). Furthermore, alumni feel their money has greater impact on smaller organizations and causes.

More effective appeals and enhanced fund-raising efforts. By understanding the issues that deter alumni from giving—and identifying the messages they do and do not find compelling—we were able to improve our fund-raising efforts. Although not due to the research alone, the undergraduate participation rate at Stanford has risen each year, from 25 percent in 1993 to 34 percent in 1997.

Are Race Relations Getting Worse?

Although alumni of color were proportionally represented in the initial survey of undergraduate alumni, there was some concern that race relations at Stanford were getting worse, based on anecdotal information from a small, outspoken, and nonrepresentative group. Consequently, there was a belief that a closer look at minority alumni would be helpful. In March 1995, we conducted a telephone survey of 820 randomly selected alumni of color, including Asian Americans, Latinos/Latinas, African Americans, and Native Americans, proportionally represented.

Much of the concern was unfounded, as it turned out. The survey revealed that alumni of color viewed Stanford as positively as, and in some ways *more* positively than, white alumni.

- Alumni of color were as satisfied (and very satisfied) as white alumni with their Stanford experience, and were just as likely to feel a strong personal commitment to Stanford. Furthermore, alumni of color were more likely than white alumni to take great pride in their Stanford degree and to feel that they got a better value at Stanford than they could have gotten elsewhere.

- The survey also strongly suggested that the racial atmosphere at Stanford was actually *improving*. For instance, 20 percent of alumni of color who graduated before 1980 agreed that Stanford was a hostile place for students of color when they were students—compared to 12 percent of those who graduated in the '80s, and just 8 percent of those who graduated in the '90s. Similar measures reflected the same trend, which is not really surprising since there were relatively few students of color at Stanford before 1980, while now they account for almost half of the student body.

This study, however, was not a call for complacency, and it underscored the challenges Stanford faces with its alumni of color (particularly African-American alumni, who are most critical of their student experience and most skeptical of the university as it is now). But, for the most part, however, the challenges are the same as those Stanford faces with white alumni—lack of engagement and ineffective communications.

Graduate Alumni

Individual studies that our office undertook explored issues unique to each of Stanford's graduate schools. But the fundamental findings were remarkably consistent, and indicated that the main challenges are the same as those with undergraduate alumni.

At each school at Stanford (Education, Humanities and Sciences, Law, Engineering, and Medicine):

- satisfaction with and perceived value of the student experience were quite high;
- engagement and awareness were very low; and
- the messages that most persuade alumni to give to the school were all the same, as were the concerns that deterred them from giving.

Education alumni. Three focus groups and a November 1994 telephone survey of 407 alumni strongly refuted the notion that alumni don't give to the school because they can't afford to.

In each of the focus groups, Education alumni (mostly nondonors) said they thought the vast majority of the school's alumni did not donate to it because they were teachers or worked in fields that didn't pay high salaries, and they simply couldn't afford to make gifts. Asked if they made annual donations to other organizations or causes, everyone said yes. Then came silence; then laughter. Once focus group members realized that "poverty" was an excuse, not a reason, more useful information came to light: They didn't see the school making a difference in the world, contributing to important educational issues, or helping address problems in education that many of them deal with every day. In short, they didn't see what the school was doing to *deserve* their support.

The survey data provided quantitative corroboration. Almost all (93 percent) of Education alumni said they give money on a regular basis to charities, cultural organizations, public interest groups, or other not-for-profit organizations, but 70-90 percent of alumni were not aware of five major programs the school had developed in recent years to help address some of the issues and problems they were most concerned about—perhaps because, as the survey also indicated, alumni received little substantive communication about the school and felt that the school magazine was mostly irrelevant to their interests.

As a result, Stanford redesigned its education periodical to improve its communications effectiveness.

Law alumni. Similarly, in four focus groups and a telephone survey of 400 Law School alumni in October 1995, about one-third did not know enough about the school to even offer an opinion about whether it is a "leader among law schools," and almost 60 percent could not point to a single area of the law in which the school is pre-eminent. They were inadequately informed—and even confused—by its communications, which since then have been redesigned.

> **"Some issues to consider when deciding between conducting research yourself and hiring an outside firm include: Expertise in research methodology, objectivity, timeliness, knowledge of the topic, cost, and confidentiality."**
>
> —Jerold Pearson

Medical alumni. Three focus groups and a May 1996 telephone survey of 402 alumni indicated that medical alumni were confused by a dual solicitation strategy (from the dean and from the Medical Alumni Association). In response to this finding, alumni are now solicited only by the dean; the association focuses on events and programs to better involve alumni.

Engineering alumni. Four focus groups, followed by a July 1995 telephone survey of 600 alumni, revealed that alumni were unaware of what the school is doing to deserve its reputation (and their support). One focus group participant said the school "has bells and whistles and all sorts of ingenious things going on, but I have little idea what the darn thing actually does."

Because the survey found that alumni were much more likely to identify with their department than with the school as a whole, it was recommended that The Engineering Fund abandon its school-based appeals in favor of department-based appeals. After a market test confirmed the soundness of this approach, the entire direct appeal program for the School of Engineering adopted it—and the fund achieved a 44 percent increase in participation and a 28 percent increase in dollars raised.

Our research also showed that the interests of engineering alumni are not limited to their individual fields, so a two-tiered communications strategy was recommended and adopted:

- School-wide communications to keep alumni informed about the breadth of activity across all Engineering departments, and
- Department newsletters to provide more targeted material.

Two years later (July 1997), a follow-up survey of 605 of the school's graduate alumni indicated that the new communications program was working: Alumni who received the two-tiered communications were better informed about the school, had more favorable impressions of it, and felt more engaged.

The Engineering survey indicated that the time had come to seriously apply online technology to alumni relations and communications. As of July 1997, 88 percent of Engineering alumni used e-mail and the Web—including virtually everyone under the age of 50, 88 percent of alumni in their 50s, and 62 percent of alumni 60 or older.

Online Services for Alumni

To provide online services and resources that alumni will find meaningful and actually use, it is necessary to first understand the underlying *benefits* they want—and then design the features that best deliver those benefits. Therefore, six focus groups were conducted in November 1997 with alumni who use e-mail and the Web. As diverse as these alumni were (undergraduate, graduate, and dual degree holders from their mid-20s to early 70s), the underlying benefits they want from Stanford online are the same:

- connectedness, or community—with other alumni and with the university (or their school or department);
- awareness—of news and information about the university, current research and scholarship, Alumni Association programs, and local alumni events;
- access to university resources—libraries, faculty and student research, health and medical resources;
- job and career networking; and
- continuing education.

Happily, the benefits alumni want from the university online coincide with the challenges it most urgently needs to meet: demonstrating the positive impact it has on the world, making alumni feel part of the Stanford community, and becoming relevant to them once again.

The key to delivering online benefits to alumni is to literally *deliver* them. Although the focus group participants said they use the Web quite often, they were not visiting any Stanford sites frequently or on a regular basis. They enthusiastically urged Stanford to employ "push" techniques to deliver information directly to their attention, and were most interested in subscribing to e-mail lists that would inform them of:

- news about the university, student life, curriculum, and current research;
- similar news and information specific to their school, department, or program;
- new online services and resources available to alumni; and
- alumni events and volunteer opportunities in their local area.

Save Time and Money with E-mail

An even more efficient way to invite alumni to focus groups (*if the population is right* and if you have the addresses) is to do it by e-mail. Alumni who want to participate respond to e-mail invitations quite promptly, while recruiting by phone takes many man-hours if done by students, or costs a fortune if done professionally. Focus group facilities and interviewing firms charge from $65 to $100 for *each person they recruit*, which is expensive when recruiting for four groups (48 people), and outrageous when recruiting for six groups (72 people).

Alumni indicated that subscription lists must be frequent enough to be timely, include clear instructions on how to unsubscribe, and be brief.

Almost all the participants said they use the Web mostly to find specific information, and not to just

Make Phone Interviews a Ringing Success

Whether interviewers are students or professionals, they must take great care with alumni. Even when callers identify themselves as employees of an interviewing firm, alumni perceive them to be indirect representatives of the institution and expect them to be courteous and articulate.

Pre-test the surveys. Surveys should be tested with colleagues (for subject matter), with a market researcher (for design and methodology), and with real members of your survey population (to ensure that respondents interpret the questions as you intend).

Monitor the calls. This is important not only to pre-test the survey, but also to catch any unanticipated interviewing problems. For example, on our survey of alumni of color, an otherwise fine interviewer kept stumbling on the word "ethnicity" and had begun to irritate, if not offend, the alumni she spoke with. She was re-assigned to a different survey.

Proper survey interviewing must be unbiased. Using student callers is fine for inviting alumni to focus groups but inappropriate for survey work unless the callers are trained and supervised by a survey lab. *Students who make fund-raising calls are especially inappropriate for surveys,* because they are trained to express enthusiasm for the university, answer questions, offer their own thoughts, and vary their calls according to each prospect. All of these are anathema to proper survey interviewing, which must be unbiased by the interviewer's feelings and expressions, noninterpretive, and free from variation.

Calling Hours. Most alumni have full-time jobs and seldom arrive home by 5 p.m., when interviewing usually begins for surveys with the general public. To avoid wasting time and money reaching answering machines — and to avoid over-representation by older and retired alumni — it is advisable to start calling at 6:30 p.m. or 7 p.m. Although this leaves fewer calling hours in each evening, they are much more productive and cost-efficient hours.

surf. With this in mind, subscription lists that include URLs can help increase awareness of the sites they link to, and may induce alumni to bookmark those sites and visit them without being prompted.

While enabling the university to reach large constituencies in a timely manner, subscription lists can also help engage and inform unique populations with focused interests (such as international alumni and Stanford football fans) and supplement direct-mail marketing for groups with limited budgets (such as alumni travel programs and the university art museum).

Meaningful content is absolutely essential to attract alumni to university Web sites, but other features can help stimulate repeat visits. Some of these are "value-added" features that increase the utility of a site, some are simply fun, and some are both. Citing features that appear in many of the most successful commercial sites, alumni said they would be more likely to pay repeat visits to Stanford sites if they included free downloads; relevant links; and even factoids, polls, and contests. As one alumna remarked of polls and contests, "Okay, so they're the Internet equivalent of those love testers in bar rooms that rate your sex appeal, but they do engage the visitor."

This research also provided Stanford with valuable insights about how to improve the usability, functionality, navigation, and content of its many sites and online services. But collecting current e-mail addresses was the most urgent priority for Stanford's online services to be of real value in alumni relations and communications. The research also suggested that it may be necessary for the various schools and programs to employ dedicated webmasters, because it is unrealistic to expect that existing staff have the time or expertise to adequately develop and maintain effective sites and online services.

Research on Reports and Advertising

As online services are launched and promoted, market research will be able to measure their penetration and impact, just as research has been conducted to assess the readership and effectiveness of printed material. In December 1995, shortly after The Stanford Fund mailed its first annual report to alumni, a telephone survey was conducted with 402 undergraduate degree holders in order to gauge the readership of the report and measure how effectively it informed readers and communicated certain messages.

Tips on Surveying Alumni

One of the most significant differences between research with alumni and the general public is that alumni are much more cooperative. Because cooperation seemed unusually high on the first few telephone surveys with Stanford alumni, a test survey was conducted to compare the cooperation rate — and detect any potential bias — on alumni surveys that do and do not identify Stanford as the sponsor. The test survey (conducted with 400 undergraduate alumni in July 1995) did not identify Stanford as the sponsor and no mention was ever made of Stanford; respondents were simply told that a public opinion research firm was conducting a brief survey on higher education. The results were compared to an almost identical (but sponsored) survey conducted at about the same time with a different sample from the same population.

The difference in cooperation was profound. Indeed, cooperation was five times higher on the survey that identified Stanford as the sponsor. Similar high cooperation rates have been obtained not only on subsequent surveys with Stanford alumni, but also on a comparative survey conducted later that year with Princeton, Yale, and Penn alumni. While the university's sponsorship may lend legitimacy to a survey, further research indicated that that the high cooperation may be due more to the respondents' affiliation with the university.

The test survey was also conducted to see if identifying Stanford as the sponsor favorably biases alumni responses due to "social desirability." The results indicate that it does not. On most measures, there was no difference whatsoever, but on one or two measures, alumni were just barely more *critical* when Stanford was identified as the sponsor than when it was not. Three possible explanations come to mind:

- Alumni may perceive a sponsored survey as an opportunity to express criticism that will be heard and perhaps make a difference.
- Alumni may be reluctant to criticize their alma mater to outsiders, not wishing to air its dirty laundry in public.
- In an anonymous survey, alumni may be considering their responses in comparison to many other less prestigious institutions, whereas in a Stanford survey, they may consider their responses in the context of Stanford alone, or in the context of Stanford's peers. For instance, respondents may feel that compared to the education they could have received at XYZ U, they are very satisfied with what they got at Stanford — while compared to what they expected from Stanford (or think they could have gotten at Harvard), they are only somewhat satisfied.

The test survey assured us that we could—and should—continue to identify Stanford in most future surveys. Any bias introduced seems to be *unfavorable* to the university, so the data should not mislead us into a false sense of security.

Phone or mail? Because response rates are so high with alumni on telephone surveys — and often so low on self-administered mail surveys — it is highly advisable to survey alumni by telephone *whenever appropriate.* In telephone surveys of alumni, nonresponse bias is minimized; in mail surveys, it is usually a significant threat to statistical validity and reliability.

Phone surveys also:

- take much less time to complete (days instead of weeks or months);
- eliminate the nightmare of counting responses and mailing two or three waves of reminders to nonrespondents, and
- (depending on the sample size) ultimately can be less expensive to conduct.

Furthermore, the introduction of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology about 10 years ago has made phone surveys preferable for a host of *methodological* reasons too numerous to discuss here.

The survey found that readership was low and some of The Stanford Fund report's objectives had not been met, perhaps because the most important information was lost in the clutter of less essential text and tables. Based on the research, the next report was redesigned, and another survey was conducted after it was mailed. The redesign helped increase readership, but the report still fell short of some of its goals, so plans were made for the third annual report to take a different approach to displaying information.

Testing Planned Giving Ads

In June 1997 four focus groups were conducted with older alumni to gauge their response to a series of ads for the Office of Planned Giving that was to appear in *Stanford* magazine. The research emphatically demonstrated that the ads not only missed their intended target (rank-and-file alumni without great fortunes), but actually conveyed a message opposite to what was intended. Almost unanimously, alumni in the focus groups said that the ads implied that they themselves were not appropriate candidates for making a planned gift. Indeed, they felt that the ads actively *excluded* them by suggesting one must be wealthy to make a meaningful planned gift; by appealing to "the ego instead of the soul;" and by emphasizing money rather than people, the gift rather than the beneficiaries of the gift.

This research demonstrates the importance of testing material and messages with their intended audiences—because "insiders" cannot always anticipate the perceptions and reactions of an external audience.

Most alumni in the focus groups relied on professional financial or legal advisors in planning

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Alumni Love Focus Groups

Just as alumni are very cooperative on telephone surveys, so too are they cooperative on focus groups, which they especially appreciate because the discussion format allows them to offer their opinions in depth. Recruiting alumni for focus groups is very easy, and no incentive fees are necessary — not even for lawyers or doctors, who often command hundreds of dollars apiece to participate in commercial focus groups. Alumni are also more likely than the general public to show up for the focus groups they say they will attend, so care must be taken that *too many* are not recruited. Unlike consumer focus groups, you cannot pay off alumni and send them home if too many show up (unless you are prepared to deal with their wrath).

Focus groups with alumni require greater sensitivity in other ways as well. To begin with, the invitation must be more forthcoming about the topic than in many other groups. This is no problem when the groups are designed to explore general topics such as their relationship with the university, their feelings about it, and their major concerns. But the more specific the topic, the more thorny this issue can be, because alumni with little interest in the topic or with negative feelings about it — who may well be the ones you most want to hear from — will opt out and not accept the invitation if it is too specific. On the other hand, if the invitation is too vague about the topic, some alumni feel duped or deceived and can become disruptive. A delicate balance must therefore be attained when recruiting for many alumni groups.

And regardless of the topic or how clearly it is stated, some alumni come to focus groups with agendas of their own, dead set on airing certain grievances and pet peeves even if they have nothing whatsoever to do with the issues being explored. While this can happen at any time, one should be especially cautious about — or avoid — conducting groups shortly after the admissions office mails its acceptance and rejection letters.

their estates; they were very uninformed about the various types of life income gift vehicles and the benefits charities can derive from them. These alumni had begun to plan their estates when they were much younger, so the study recommended that Stanford increase awareness of its estate planning programs among alumni in their 30s and 40s. The study also recommended that the tested ads be scrapped, which they were.

Market research—especially when designed to produce actionable, rather than merely descriptive, data—enables decisions to be informed by valid and reliable measurements rather than by anecdote, speculation, and personal bias. And there are a wide range of alumni and development issues for which market research can be valuable. For instance, in addition to those already discussed, other studies that have been conducted include:

- a multi-institutional comparative survey;
- fund-raising research for the athletics department;
- a survey to evaluate the Reunion Homecoming program;
- studies to suggest new marketing strategies for Stanford football, the Continuing Studies Program, and the Committee For Art;
- surveys for The Stanford Channel to measure viewership and its influence on perceptions of Stanford;
- a study of the college selection process from the parents' perspective;
- readership research for *Stanford* magazine; and
- a study to better understand alumni relations and development issues unique to alumni living in Asia.

Benefits of an In-House Researcher

An in-house researcher will develop familiarity and expertise with the issues and constituencies most important to your institution. This enables him or her to design more incisive research and to bring context and perspective to the findings from any individual study. Once this person's work becomes known around campus, and once its value is recognized by one or two key individuals, the staff researcher will also attain a credibility that can help expedite action and get recommendations implemented. Conducting research in-house is also more cost-effective than contracting with research firms.

Like auto repair, market research involves expenses for parts and labor. And, just as at the local garage, labor is much more expensive than parts. A phone survey that has $4,000 in "hard costs" for interviewing might cost anywhere from $15,000 to $22,000 if it is contracted out to a research firm. A research firm may charge $8,000 to $10,000 for a pair of focus groups, although the "hard costs" of renting a facility with catering is only about $1,000. The more an in-house researcher can do—from crunching numbers to moderating focus groups—the more cost-effective the position can be.

The resources required for in-house research are minimal. I am a one-man shop with no staff, and have been able to complete about eight or nine studies a year.

My interviewing costs for a seven or eight minute telephone survey of 400 alumni are usually about $3,000. Obviously, a 20 minute survey of 600 alumni would cost more. While quality and cost vary among interviewing firms, some factors that determine interviewing costs are the length of the survey, the sample size, the number of invalid phone numbers dialed, the number of attempts needed to reach respondents, the cooperation rate, and the number of open-ended questions (which take time to record and then code). Besides standard office software, the only computer resources needed are a graphics and charting program, a database, and a statistical analysis package. A good crystal ball or Ouija board is also very helpful.

Paper 2

Aware that its alumni body was undergoing change, MIT went right to the source to find out what services alumni valued, what services they might want to see offered, and how the association stacked up with others. As a result, the association made a major shift in staff and budget resources.

An Unvarnished Look

Evaluating Alumni Services and Planning Alumni Programs

Diana Tilley Strange
Director, Special Projects
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

William J. Hecht
Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer, Alumni Association
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In 1992, the MIT Alumni Association board of directors appointed a long-range strategy committee (LRSC) to take a fresh look at the association's work. The LRSC hired an outside research consultant to test the perceived needs and reactions of alumni to services we were offering and to other possibilities similar to those at peer institutions.

The association has a dual role: to serve MIT's needs for alumni support and to serve the needs of our graduates for lifelong relationships with one another and with MIT. Although the alumni association legally is an independent organization, the sole source of its funding is MIT's operating budget. This strong institutional connection, taken together with a responsibility to serve and benefit its members, defines the association.

The association reports to a volunteer board of directors selected by an elected alumni National Selection Committee (NSC), which also selects 15 members of the MIT Corporation (MIT's trustees) as well as many members of the corporation's visiting committees.

“If your institution did not have a good relationship with a student, you may spend 25 or 50 or 75 years of that person’s life and may never be able to repair that. The relationship issue is absolutely crucial. You can’t divorce an alumnus or alumna.”

—William J. Hecht

The association is also the home of MIT’s Alumni Fund, which in fiscal year 1997 reported more than $26 million in gifts. The association also maintains the alumni records database (including gift records). Its activities include class reunions and publishing MIT’s *Technology Review*, the alumni magazine that has a national subscriber base as large as its alumni circulation.

After the summer of 1992, when MIT completed a successful capital campaign, the board decided to examine the association’s programs and activities. It wanted to raise questions even about successful activities such as the Alumni Fund and about whether it was appropriate to support a national magazine. Perhaps some radical changes were needed, the board seemed to be suggesting in deciding to put everything on the table.

The LRSC Planning Process

In the fall of 1992, the board formed the LRSC to take a fresh look at the strategy and direction of the association in light of a significant change in the “nature and composition of individuals comprising the association’s membership.” The team chosen included seven alumni volunteers, five MIT staff members (association and others), and one faculty member (an MIT graduate). Four working groups established their own methodology by gathering historical materials, benchmarking, and conducting research in the following areas:

- mission and objectives,
- duplication or gaps in fund raising between the association and MIT’s development office,
- effectiveness of the association’s communications/publications and value/cost of *Technology Review*, and
- association services.

The research concentrated on alumni services, setting the following objectives:

- to evaluate how alumni perceive MIT’s alumni services as compared with alumni services at other universities,
- to analyze and reach conclusions on prospective changes, and
- to propose a plan of action.

Selecting the Consultant

Because MIT was in a retrenchment mode—inspired by *Reengineering the Corporation*, the popular book written by two alumni—the committee opted for an outside consultant. Any

The Survey at a Glance

Sample: The MIT Alumni Association’s long-range strategy committee (LRSC) wanted to ensure that three alumni groups were represented in the phone survey undertaken in February 1994: graduate-only alumni, recent graduates, and women. The professional firm hired to do the survey completed 252 telephone interviews with a generally representational sample of alumni, adding a supplemental subcell of 50 alumni to ensure adequate coverage of their views.

Method: After interviewing staff and volunteers, the consultant developed an 11-question survey (plus demographic questions). Questions were designed to enable the association to compare MIT with other schools, as well as to compare the appropriateness, usefulness, and likelihood of use of 17 types of services. The telephone interviews had closed and open-ended questions; each conversation lasted about 12 minutes.

proposal to initiate programs would need to be accompanied by a plan for reallocating resources and probably generating resources outside MIT. Following numerous interviews, the association chose Sibley Associates, in part for its experience with university surveys, its ability to probe and gain insight from respondents, and its computerized phone capabilities.

Highlights of Findings

The committee's first question was, "How is the MIT Alumni Association doing in comparison with other institutions?" The caller did not identify MIT as the client in asking interviewees to identify which universities they had degrees from and how those alumni associations compared. According to Sibley's report, "Across the board, MIT alumni services outperform the collected scoring for other alumni associations." This finding of MIT's strong showing might well have been viewed with suspicion if it had not been conducted by a reputable, experienced, outside research firm.

Services now offered. Using a 10-point scale, survey respondents viewed the association's five fully developed services as highly appropriate and very useful. In terms of "likelihood of use," the magazine was rated highest (89 percent—much higher than the percentage of those who actually get the magazine). The travel program was ranked lowest (35 percent), reflecting the small number of alumni who choose to travel with MIT.

Programs being developed. Respondents ranked alumni directories highest on likelihood of use (79 percent) and special group celebrations lowest (36 percent).

New opportunities suggested. The highest rankings on likelihood of use went to possibilities with an MIT-related intellectual content and those to be delivered using electronic technologies.

Overall. The six services that scored strongly in all three dimensions—appropriateness, usefulness, and likelihood of use—were:

- *Technology Review*;
- alumni registers and directories;
- access to MIT lectures, seminars, and faculty;
- sales of university intellectual material;
- use of computers and electronic technology for MIT services; and
- class reunions.

All six of these services have a common characteristic: Only MIT can provide them.

Lessons Learned

Based on the survey results, the LRSC in the fall of 1994 took as its guiding principles:

- The association's major ongoing programs are solid and effective.
- An alumni magazine is the mostly highly valued MIT alumni service.
- Alumni directories are the service most in demand because graduates want to find one another.
- Services most important to alumni are those with content only MIT can offer.
- New service opportunities include online initiatives, career and professional development, and lifelong learning opportunities.

The LRSC decided to begin developing and testing online services. However, it recommended that credit cards, group insurance, and discount programs be approached with caution.

Action Steps

In implementing the recommendations, the association underwent a major reallocation of staff and budget resources. It assigned three experienced senior staff members to work on career and professional support services, develop a more robust lifelong learning program, and investigate computer-based services. By 1997, the association had:

- proposed a new Web-based Alumni Network Service (ANS) for MIT alumni only, including an identification and authentication procedure associated with a permanent MIT e-mail address and routing service. Services to follow will include an online alumni directory and bulletin board and conferencing services. In February 1997, the ANS had more than 12,400 registered users, three full-time staff members, and a $100,000 program budget. During its first five weeks, the ANS forwarded an average of 10,000 e-mail messages each day.
- launched an Institute Career Assistance Network, featuring 2,000 alumni mentors responding to nearly 1,000 requests. Web-based offerings are expanding in the professional support area.
- offered new lifelong learning opportunities for alumni, including "MIT on the Road" seminars in Florida, New York, Chicago, and Lisbon in 1998, plus alumni conferences in Switzerland. The association is investigating Web-based services with MIT libraries and joint courses with other MIT units.
- started a Web-based alumni directory that includes the capacity to update personal records and features mini-directories for club regions and special interest groups.

Senior staff have risen to the challenge and made significant improvements in basic alumni services. In the three years since the survey, the association has used the results with key alumni volunteers and other MIT offices, although it could make even more use of them with staff members. The research demonstrated that the association has taken an unvarnished look at itself. The outcomes have been impressive. The future will require continued assessment and evaluation.

Response from Kent Rollins

President and Director of the Arizona Alumni Association

University of Arizona

I have a number of colleagues here from the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE), which comprises 83 independent or interdependent alumni associations around the country. These associations tend to be relatively large, self-governing organizations. I want to share their perspective today.

In the 1980s, most independent alumni associations had a fairly steep growth curve. As a result of capital campaigns, there were quite a lot of capital funds around to grow the organization. If an association found a need for additional programming, there was capital available to put into that programming and to hire additional staff. That's the way we solved a lot of our problems.

Among independent and interdependent alumni associations alike, it wasn't until 1990 that most of our budgets hit the skids. At Arizona, we lost about 40 percent of our operating funds. We're funded about 50 percent from our own resources and 50 percent from institutional resources.

We had to start making tougher decisions. We looked at the type of programming we should begin to offer. For the most part, we had been using the "wise-ass guess" (WAG) to see if we should be in certain types of programs. The WAG is based a lot on experience, but it has no scientific background. It involves gathering a bunch of people in a room, pooling their ignorance, and coming up with a solution. When this method is effective, it's great—but we didn't always hit it lucky. What we see with research is that we can take some of the WAG out of it.

Here's an example—pulled straight out of our strategic plan—of how our group came up with a list of criteria on how to evaluate the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of our program. Stop and think about where research can play a part. We were trying to evaluate the following questions:

- Who were the customers?
- Which customers needed to be addressed by the program?
- How many customers used the program and how were they affected by it?
- What is the perceived value of the program for its customers?
- How does it compare to similar programs offered by peer alumni programs?
- How does the program build stronger relationships among the alumni, the alumni association, and the university?
- How does the program contribute to the association's mission?
- What demands does it place on the association's resources?
- To what extent do the program's benefits justify its cost?
- Does the program use partnerships to add value?

This list of questions sounded great, but we had to come up with a way to answer them, other than by our own judgment and that of 50 alumni around the country (our usual way of doing a "focus group"—by phone). We decided to ask the College of Business marketing department for help with research.

We were looking for five kinds of things in developing new performance measures for our association. We wanted to:

- enhance the quality of our services,
- improve our management practices,
- evaluate our alumni programs,
- aid in budget development and review, and
- make alumni programs more understandable.

We wanted to describe how a mutually beneficial relationship really works. How is that individual or group relationship going to pay off? Clearly the difference between alumni and development is that development has a bottom line.

In our CAAE summer meeting in 1997, we spent the entire time talking about the future of alumni associations. Let me share some things we agreed on. The alumni association of the future believes in:

- the strategy of market segmentation and target marketing,
- the need to form partnerships with internal and external constituencies,
- the need to communicate with alumni more effectively and with greater focus,
- the concept that we will always be in the relationship-building business, and
- the reality that we will remain mission-driven and results-oriented.

Research will help define what we do, in concrete terms. It will give us qualitative and quantitative measures. That's what will make it effective. Getting alumni professionals and researchers together really will begin the dialogue of how can we improve this process. Can we do more of this, where we understand the institutional research business better, and researchers understand the alumni association business better? That will make us more effective.

Response from Marian Pagano

Associate Provost
Columbia University

There are some key points I'd like to introduce for discussion. One thing we should all think about is the use of an outside consultant vs. an in-house one. I'd like to hear more about that choice. MIT justified its choice by concluding that it would bring legitimacy and an independent expert. I agree; that's important. But why so in this case? Most senior surveys are done in-house. Even if the institution employs an outside consultant, the institutional research (IR) office can help that consultant to communicate and participate with the campus community.

Many IR professionals have been there forever. Institutional researchers can teach the campus community how to interpret results; they can come up with common methods—graphics, bullets, and other ways—to present data to help the campus community read and interpret the results.

As I read the Pearson paper, it struck me that there's an amazing similarity between the findings about what makes alumni happy and connected to their alma mater and what makes students happy and connected to their university. It's the relationship; it's the community. One of the purposes of IR is to debunk or confirm myths. This incredible similarity could probably save some time as we think about how future research is formulated and how future questions and methodologies are developed.

I'm also struck by the need to quantify and measure abstract concepts for alumni, as we must do for students, faculty members, and parents. How do we measure that engagement between alumni and the university? That's something institutional researchers struggle with on student surveys.

Campus community is also a variable on the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) senior survey. When that survey ranked Columbia rather low with regard to its sense of campus community, everyone wanted to understand that finding further. No one can really get their hands around it.

This idea of a sense of engagement or connection of alumni to the university is also one of those really fuzzy concepts. Everyone can have an opinion about what it is, but if we don't agree on it, it's tough to measure. And if we measure something about which we don't agree, it doesn't make any sense.

Q&A

What about generalizability? Are we always going to have to add, "this works...at least at my institution"?

Jerold Pearson: There will certainly be measures that do vary from school to school, or individual issues that will be unique to specific institutions. But I'd be surprised if some of the basic dynamics are not fairly similar among alumni from most universities. For instance, we've found that most Stanford alumni—even those who've had no contact with the university for 20 or 30 years—are eager to participate in focus groups because they want to be heard. They also appreciate being valued for their opinions, and not just for their money. Why alumni join alumni associations and the benefits they desire from membership may also be similar at many universities. How well those benefits are being provided, however, would vary from school to school.

Marian Pagano: We can also look to COFHE's senior survey that is used everywhere from Amherst to Columbia University. Working together, some commonalities have been discovered that can be quantified.

Do we really care about comparative studies or should we be most concerned about what our own alumni think?

Pearson: Comparative research allows you to better interpret data that might otherwise exist in a vacuum. It helps you see if your cup is half empty or half full. For instance, the first survey I conducted at Stanford produced readership data that was interpreted different ways by different people. By conducting a comparative survey with some of our peer institutions, we were able to see the data in a meaningful context and better understand what it implied about our own communications efforts.

Do we have differences between men and women in their connectedness to their institution? How do we support those differences? I have a hypothesis that in this level of connectedness, there's a relationship with the degree obtained. The relationship of people who received a bachelor's degree might be very different than with those who received a master's degree or doctorate degree.

William Hecht: We did oversample women because although MIT's been coed for 125 years, the percentage was very small and was actually larger before World War I than between World Wars I and II. We found no discernible difference.

Pearson: Among Stanford alumni, there seem to be very few gender differences, at least in terms of attitudes and perceptions of the university. There are differences, however, by degree level. As other schools may also have found, alumni tend to identify more closely with their undergraduate institution. And among alumni with only a graduate degree from Stanford, we've found that some who have only a master's degree feel that they are "cash cows" to help finance the doctoral programs.

From the April 3 repeat of the session

Response from Pat McArdle

Associate Vice President for Alumni Relations
Georgetown University

I would like to share two points for discussion. First, two months ago, I was appointed the alumni director at Georgetown University, so I am speaking from a "new kid on the block" perspective. Coming into this position, I faced a lot of transition in the life of our alumni organization. Our volunteer leadership was about to turn over, the strategic plan was five years old and in need of revision, and Georgetown was about to embark on a $750 million capital campaign. It was a perfect time to assess what we were doing.

How then to get at the task of planning the future of alumni relations at Georgetown? We had three options: 1.) we could rely on the collective judgment of staff using a trial and error method as we moved forward; 2.) we could look to our volunteer leadership as representatives of alumni interests and needs; or 3.) we could go to a professional network of colleagues in colleges and universities for their experience and advice. But even doing all of that is not enough. What I really lacked was some good, hard market data.

My second point needs some backgound. The Georgetown Alumni Association was incorporated in 1947 and set up with the university's blessing. Alumni themselves self-started all the activities that alumni associations typically do and that go on today at Georgetown, including class agents, regional alumni chapters, a magazine, even a model alumni admissions program. Over the years, the Association's relationship with the University became much more interdependent and we didn't anticipate the small group of alumni who didn't want to see any change in this relationship. This group came forward with a lawsuit that took many years and many dollars to resolve. It's taken almost 10 years to recover from that. Had we had access to research on alumni opinion and done some analysis, we might have been able to avoid some of those entanglements.

I'm very appreciative of our presenters and organizers, and I want to thank them for teaching me to appreciate the value of research information that I don't currently have. God willing and "if the Potomac don't rise," I plan to go out and get it.

Response from Judy Grace

Project Manager, Curriculum Development
Western Governors' University

We have reason to celebrate this conference and these two studies. They contribute a great deal to the legitimacy and contributions that alumni researchers have made to institutional planning.

I do want to throw out three points for our discussion.

1) Is the concept of market analysis still in conflict philosophically with the academic enterprise? It's a very hard sell for administrators. One of the things I like about the papers is that the research now is tending to back away a little bit from the profile of the big donor to looking instead at the relationship between the institution and the alumnus/a, and trying to redefine that relationship as a sense of engagement. I believe that term was used in both papers. It works for people who see themselves as volunteers; for these individuals, their role as a donor is not the primary definition of that relationship. That's a very important relationship that may later relate to being a donor.
2) If our education graduates (or graduates of other schools) are doing a lot of work with the Internet, what does that say about the kind of training and experience they had as undergraduates, and is there a connection between the two? One of the things I like to see in alumni research is information about how alums are doing; then we can feed that information back to their undergraduate school so that the experience with the current undergraduates can be enhanced. I don't think we make enough of those connections intellectually, nor do we make them in our planning processes. I would like to do a lot more in our current research to tie the findings to what's happening now.
3) If we're putting a lot of money into the electronic relationship, what are we going to do for the Class of 2025? Have we thought ahead about what kind of resources we're going to need to communicate with them in whatever way they will be communicated with? I have no idea what way that will be. But there's been a real shift in our way of communicating, in the use of technology and the investment in infrastructure, and certainly in the privacy issues. We have to begin to build that in instead reacting to where the alums are now.

One general comment: I would like to get back to looking at alumni and the milestones in their lives after they leave their undergraduate institution. In the context of undergraduate vs. graduate alumni, and how that influences institutional communications with them, if data already exist in those terms, further analysis could determine if, for example, the Stanford or MIT graduate-level experience is overshadowed by or overshadows the previous experience. That might be a way to focus on donor giving profiles and volunteer engagement.

Q&A

How can we become more proactive and take a look at market research from a strategic perspective, the way we do with an analysis of prior-year donors? What about doing some kind of segmentation and targeting of our messages based on characteristics certain alumni have?

Hecht: We managed to find the handful of department chairs who thought their former students might want to hear from them once in a while, and we now have 23 letters written from department chairs as part of the annual fund. We can test each year what the response rates are. We have a special set of letters that goes out internationally to graduate alumni. The letter for the Germans is quite different than the letter for the French because the tax implications are quite different in the two countries. For many of our graduate alumni, the MIT graduate experience seems to overwhelm any prior undergraduate experience. Once we connect with them, they seem to behave like an undergraduate audience.

Pearson: Segmentation can be a good idea, but don't do more than is actionable. Don't waste time and money identifying 10 or 12 segments if you only have the resources or budget to target two. Also, at Stanford, we've found that there are fewer differences within each population than we would have thought. There are almost no significant differences between men and women in their engagement with the institution, their perceptions of it, and their reasons for giving and not giving. There are even fewer age differences than we had anticipated, although the biggest difference in attitudes and perceptions *is* a generational one.

Have you attempted to calculate the benefits of engaging in this research and data collection and compare them with the cost? We're all going to be under pressure to look at that.

Diana Tilley Strange: So much of what we do is building the community, and there are values in a university associated with building the community that extend beyond the ability of the community to generate gifts or additional resources. At MIT during our last campaign, we decided to do a special cultivation activity and invite potential major donors to the campus. The first year we did it, they had to buy their own plane ticket, but once they got there, they were fêted. They went to the president's house, they met with Nobel Prize winners, they met with students who were doing solar car projects. It was a wonderful time, and everybody loved it. Did these people make big gifts? We looked around the room and asked ourselves, did anybody ask them? No! That activity had to be coupled with a deliberate plan.

Pearson: Return on investment in research can be calculated in different ways. Some research is designed to suggest immediate actions that can be taken, and the success of those actions can later be measured. Of course, the success of those actions depends on *how* they are implemented (which is "marketing") as well as *what* actions are implemented (which come from "market research").

Other research is designed to identify issues that can only be addressed in the long term, so calculating return on investment is difficult. Research *will* be more valuable, though, if it is designed to suggest actionable strategies, rather than merely produce descriptive data. In other words, don't waste money researching things you can't do anything about anyway. It's also important that the decision makers *want* the research. If they are not receptive to data that can help them make more informed decisions, then the research will be unused and the money spent will have been wasted.

Hecht: The pure researcher frequently says, "Aha! Let's look at everybody who doesn't care about the place!" That's like the sales manager who says, "Let's spend all our energy on the 50 percent of the people who don't buy from us." You'll go bankrupt very quickly because your customers are your customers.

Both papers commented on alums who said that what their institution did for them was unique, that only that institution could do it. It would be a very good thing for every institution to know what its graduates think is the effect of their four, five, or six years there. Not everybody has a Stanford or an MIT alumni association. Some of us have very weak alumni associations. That's one of the messages of these papers: If we can spend our market research dollars finding out what is unique about the experience of the majority of our undergraduates, then promote that uniqueness as a recruitment device and put our money into enhancing that undergraduate experience, the effort is worth any investment.

Hecht: One of the things I've come to appreciate as I've spent time outside the United States with our alumni is that we really do have an extraordinarily unusual educational system, unlike anything else in the rest of the world. Catalogs and campaign case statements are all beginning to sound like pureed peas. U.S. colleges and universities are very different institutions, and stressing that difference, understanding that difference, treasuring that difference is critically important. One of the great strengths of American colleges and universities and community colleges is that they are unique. Let's keep it that way!

Now that you have your secure Web site, are you doing Web surveys?

Pearson: The one survey we've done so far on the Web was with current undergraduates. Every one of them had an e-mail address and Web access, so everyone in the sample could receive the invitation and link to the survey. When we have valid e-mail addresses for more alumni, I hope to do some Web-based surveys with them. But until the vast majority of a given population is online, you won't be able to conduct a Web survey with a scientifically random sample of that population. And without a true random sample, your data may be seriously compromised by exclusion bias.

Hecht: The oldest class member registered for MIT's e-mail forwarding is from the Class of 1933. The cohort of the 1920s is not online yet—or at least they haven't told us about it.

Ideas from Participants

Storing survey data: Make sure survey data is archived in a way that facilitates comparisons years later. An outside firm may not always do this.

Think of the client: Don't bother doing the research unless the client is interested in the question and the results.

CHAPTER 2

Paper 3

Solid research can help institutions of higher education get the word out to the media about the value of a college education. A survey of alumni of 46 independent colleges and universities in Pennsylvania five years after graduation found that most alumni were working in responsible positions, well along in repaying their undergraduate loans, active in their families and communities, and highly satisfied with their undergraduate experiences.

Our Grads Are Doing Great!

Uses of an Alumni Survey by Independent Colleges and Universities in Pennsylvania

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Georgetown University
and
Jason P. Casey
Director of Research, Association of Independent Colleges
and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP)

In the 1990s, higher education in the United States has been undergoing critical scrutiny of unprecedented scope and intensity. Parents, students, and government leaders are calling into question the value of a college degree.

Two key factors fuel this scrutiny: the well-documented explosion in the costs of attending college over the past two decades and concerns about the job prospects and even the employability of college graduates. The mass media have covered these issues extensively and often negatively, relating anecdotes of families whose lives have been derailed rather than enriched by higher education. Many of us have read or heard about parents who had to sell their homes and postpone retirement to put their children through college or about college graduates flipping burgers and living with their parents.

Such "horror stories" fan the flames of consumer worry and anger. In some cases, these reports have led to legislative action: Some states have imposed almost punitive funding restrictions and reporting requirements on colleges and universities.

A Role for Alumni Research

Against this backdrop, colleges and universities face increasing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness. Because a college education is an investment whose dividends accrue for many years after graduation, it is logical to conduct research on alumni to respond to the public's legitimate concerns.

For years, many institutions have surveyed their former students. These surveys are of limited use in understanding the labor market and other factors and in making comparisons across institutions, however, because most of these studies:

- use different questionnaire formats,
- vary in their sampling techniques,
- have low response rates (25 to 45 percent), and
- either don't ask questions on earnings or pose such questions in ways that lead to predictably negative effects on the response rate. (Alumni fear the school's fund raisers will use the information for solicitations and may skip the question or decide not to return the survey.)

In 1996, the Pennsylvania Independent College and University Research Center (PICURC) undertook a study—funded by a grant from the Vira I. Heinz Endowment—to examine the experiences of baccalaureate graduates from independent colleges and universities five to six years after their graduation in 1990. Pennsylvania's independent colleges and universities had awarded 51 percent of the state's bachelor's degrees in 1990. PICURC surveyed alumni from 46 of these schools; it focused on the Class of 1990's occupational and educational advancement. The survey examined five sets of outcomes:

- employment after college,
- educational pursuits after the baccalaureate,
- social and personal development,

The Survey at a Glance

Sample: Of 30,667 graduates in 1990 from Pennsylvania independent colleges and universities, 11,108 graduates from 46 institutions participated in the study. At institutions with fewer than 360 graduates, we surveyed everyone in the graduating class. For larger institutions, we did random samples of 360 graduates, excluding graduates who lived outside the United States and taking into consideration gender and state of residence.

Method: PICURC sent participants a cover letter and a four-page survey in the spring of 1996, with a follow-up mailing to nonrespondents. We conducted a telephone survey with a sampling of those who didn't respond by mail.

For a subset of respondents, we also collected background information from their undergraduate institutions and merged it with the responses we received from the surveys. These data included gender, ethnicity, age, undergraduate GPA, and annual fund status, as well as other data. We kept all responses and background information strictly confidential.

Response rate: Overall, 61 percent of those who received surveys responded; although the telephone follow-up was costly, it had measurable benefits in terms of response rate.

- satisfaction with undergraduate education, and
- undergraduate student loan borrowing and repayment trends.

Highlights of the Findings

All 81 member institutions of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP) were invited to participate. The 46 schools that took part in the study represented all major institution types—but did not include the state's four most selective private institutions. Our results may therefore underestimate positive outcomes.

Employment status. Recalling their status four months after their graduation in 1990, 70 percent of respondents reported they had been employed full-time; 14 percent had been employed part-time; 2 percent had been unemployed by choice; and 6 percent had been seeking employment. Five years later (1995), 84 percent were employed full-time; smaller percentages were attending graduate or professional school, performing volunteer work, and/or staying at home with children. Fewer than 2 percent were unemployed and seeking employment.

Salary/majors. On average, graduates employed full-time earned $37,664 annually. Males earned more: The gender gap was about $4,400 for respondents who had only a baccalaureate, though it was narrower ($1,800) for those with master's, doctoral, law, or medical degrees. Average salaries ranged from $28,090 in education to $46,692 in medicine. The most popular majors by far were in business and management, which had more than twice as many graduates as education, the next most popular.

Further education. By the spring of 1996, more than one-fourth of the respondents had earned a postbaccalaureate degree, and 12 percent were completing graduate degrees. About 74 percent had completed some other postbaccalaureate training or coursework, and 41 percent had plans to earn an advanced degree eventually. Significant numbers had pursued courses offered by their employers (60 percent), by another company (23 percent), and credit courses at a four-year college or university (23 percent).

Personal lives. 28 percent of respondents lived in households with gross incomes between $40,000 and $60,000. About 51 percent owned homes. About 54 percent performed some unpaid volunteer service in 1995.

Charitable giving. 62 percent had given to their alma mater's annual fund at least once since graduation. For those with greater student loan debt, the likelihood of making a charitable contribution decreased.

Satisfaction with undergraduate education. 96 percent of the respondents reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied (on a five-part scale) with their undergraduate academic experience; 90 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their social experience of college, and 96 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall undergraduate experience. All 46 institutions received high satisfaction ratings, suggesting that satisfaction was widespread and did not apply to just a few schools. The vast majority (79 percent) of respondents said they had recommended their college to someone else in the preceding five years.

Student loans. The median amount borrowed for undergraduate education was $11,000, of which 44 percent was still owed at the time of the survey. For postbaccalaureate education, the median was $15,000, of which 84 percent was still owed. About 10 percent owed on loans for both, having borrowed an average of $29,000.

The data provide evidence of the financial stress felt by many middle-income individuals and families who are required to borrow more heavily for college than are other socioeconomic groups. Students who attend full-time can be expected to finish more quickly, but they also graduate with more debt. The borrowing habits of successful students clearly form a complex dynamic, and attempts to describe this debt in "worst case" scenarios will produce deceptive impressions.

"One of the things that plagues survey research on alumni is relatively low response rates. It's hard to locate and get the cooperation of alumni. It's hard to find good addresses and phone numbers. It's difficult to get alumni to spend time in their busy lives to fill out a survey. So the 20 percentage point bump that we got from using a phone follow-up was really one of the strengths of the study."

—Michael D. McGuire

In-state vs. out-of-state. Do private colleges attract capable students to Pennsylvania from other states? Do "imported" students, as well as Pennsylvanians, remain in-state to work and go to graduate school? Two-thirds (67 percent) of the survey respondents were Pennsylvania residents before pursuing their undergraduate degrees, and 74 percent of these graduates were still in-state in 1996. Of those who came from out-of-state to go to college in Pennsylvania, 19 percent were still in Pennsylvania in 1996; New Jersey was the second most popular state of residence for this group (10 percent).

Respondents from out-of-state had significantly higher SAT scores (40 points on Verbal, 35 on Math) than Pennsylvania residents. A high proportion of "exports" (Pennsylvanians who left the state after graduation) were in the education field.

Alumni Outcomes: What Do They Mean?

For the Class of 1990, the outcomes were largely positive. This group had a lower unemployment rate than the state average and a higher mean salary after controlling for age, gender, and educational level. Most had successfully entered the labor force and begun their career tracks.

One robust finding is that the undergraduate degree is not perceived to be a terminal degree. Increasingly, advanced training and education are necessary for career advancement in most fields. For some graduates, the sheer intellectual stimulation of postbaccalaureate enrollment is almost certainly a motivator.

Respondents seemed to be engaged productively as consumers, volunteers, taxpayers, spouses, and parents. Most were earning very respectable livings. Notably, graduates who were most involved in volunteer activity also were employed full-time. Many found time to contribute to their communities in important ways that are not always reflected in narrowly focused economic and labor market statistics.

Once their immediate postbaccalaureate adjustments were behind them, these graduates gave their college experience an overwhelmingly positive grade.

A Sound Investment

Higher education enables most people who complete a baccalaureate degree to embark on important life goals: worthwhile careers; a relatively high standard of living; and the pursuit of personal fulfillment for themselves, their families, and their communities. Alarmist anecdotal accounts of graduates who fail miserably at life after college do not represent the vast majority of alumni we surveyed. Unfortunately, the old adage that "good news doesn't sell" is true for higher education as well. Broad-based, credible research on alumni may be the best way to get that message out to the media.

Most alumni did not step into their dream jobs right after graduation. A bachelor's degree is not a guarantee of career success, and the first postbaccalaureate steps are almost never highly lucrative ones. However, the PICURC study found widespread, significant progress toward lifetime career and personal fulfillment only five years after graduation. Realistic expectations will alleviate anxiety about the short-term "lift-off" and will help balance the cost equation. When higher education is perceived as an investment for a lifetime (i.e., about 60 years), the amortization schedule on a college degree is a feasible and ultimately worthwhile one.

Action Steps

How colleges used the data. The 46 schools that participated in the study received three reports:

- detailed tables of the responses of their own alumni;
- a report on the entire sample; and
- an eight-page, four-color advocacy brochure highlighting details of the study in an easy-to-understand format.

Institutional researchers, registrars, and others making internal reports and presentations seemed to make the greatest use of the study. Admissions offices used the brochure in various ways; one liberal arts college sent it as a final "yield" piece to admitted students to emphasize the lasting value of a private college education.

Most institutions have expressed an interest in repeating the study periodically, and most would be willing to help finance it.

> **"We used the survey results in advocacy. On behalf of the private sector [Pennsylvania colleges and universities], we have a rather strong lobbying arm. Our foundation [AICUP] used the results in fund raising, taking it out to potential donors and demonstrating to them that indeed the graduates of our institutions were earning good salaries and working in some of their operations. We also have a communications campaign under way. We've had a number of op-ed pieces placed, and some news articles included this as source material."**
>
> —Jason P. Casey

Areas for further study:

- outcomes for nontraditional students;
- cohorts from other graduation years, public institutions, and other states;
- student loan burdens for cohorts that graduated after 1990;
- paths and processes leading graduates to current career stages;
- outcomes 10 years after graduation, 20 years after graduation, or later; and
- outcomes for those who never attended college or who did not complete it.

Paper 4

How can an institution of higher education "grow" active alumni? One answer is the Cornell Tradition and its high level of institutional commitment to undergraduates. Creating a comprehensive, sustaining program that offers grants and a wide range of support to a select group of working students can have a positive impact when they become alumni.

A Model for Nurturing Students

What Makes a Difference? The Cornell Tradition Program

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Analysis for Admissions and Financial Aid
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Over the past two decades, private institutions have had to rely more than ever on the support of their alumni, particularly for undergraduate financial aid. With tuition rising faster than inflation and family income and with cutbacks in federal and state grant aid, undergraduates have experienced a major increase in their debt levels. Colleges and universities have made up the difference by devoting more institutional resources to financial aid. Recycling of tuition revenue in the form of institutional grant support has reached alarming levels at many institutions, stimulating major efforts to increase alumni endowments and gifts.

Prospective students and their parents have become increasingly sensitive to college costs and financial aid issues. Even many selective institutions face increased competition in attracting top students. Given today's competitive marketplace, the role of alumni extends beyond making financial contributions to their alma mater. At many colleges and universities, alumni lend a hand in the admissions process, serve as mentors, and provide internships and jobs for students and recent graduates.

The importance of alumni contributions to private institutions raises critical questions: What, if anything, can institutions do to nurture or reinforce the values that will encourage undergraduates to support their institution after graduation, either financially or by volunteering? Can a college or university, through its institutional commitment and programs, provide models of active citizenship and participation in community service?

Most studies of alumni donors suggest that undergraduate experiences, such as participation in extracurricular activities, are much weaker predictors of active alumni involvement than other characteristics such as gender, age, and current income. Although fund raisers assume that a positive attitude toward the alma mater is a prerequisite of alumni giving, there have been few studies of how a positive attitude is nurtured.

Our study had two purposes: to conceptualize a model in which the institution plays an active role in fostering the value and abilities of undergraduates—encouraging them to be active, engaged alumni—and to test this model using Cornell University's data. We set out to examine how participation in the Cornell Tradition, an undergraduate special recognition program, affects young alumni behavior.

Framing the Issues

Our conceptual framework depended largely on Alexander Astin's Input-Environment-Output (IEO) model. According to Astin, "inputs refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution; environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and outcomes refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment."

Our modification, which we call the Input-Commitment-Environment-Output (ICEO) model, introduces a new element: institutional commitment. This commitment is the degree to which the college or university acts to produce defined student outcomes by creating and reinforcing certain environmental circumstances. This concept is critically important in explaining why some institutions are more successful in affecting student outcomes in intended ways.

The challenge institutions face is separating those aspects of the environment that they create and reinforce from those that the students produce for themselves. For example, suppose the school's goal is to instill in undergraduates the value of alumni financial support. The simplest way to do this is to note its importance through articles in the campus newspaper and other university publications. A further step might be to invite an alumnus/a donor to speak to current students about staying connected to one's alma mater. The institution could provide students with scholarships named after donors and create opportunities for recipients to meet these alumni. At each step, the institution increases its active role and commitment with the intent that students grow into active, committed alumni donors.

Some activities, like joining a fraternity, can be viewed as either an environmental concept or an outcome depending upon the research context, as can postbaccalaureate experiences such as employment or graduate school.

Mission Statement of the Cornell Tradition

The Cornell Tradition strives to encourage and support lifestyles that integrate a strong work ethic, public service, and academic achievement by rewarding students who exemplify these characteristics with recognition and financial support for their education. The program encourages Cornell Tradition Fellows to unify around these common commitments and to serve as models to their communities. The Cornell Tradition also supports the development of fellows into well-rounded, productive members of society, who, as alumni, will continue to support the program both financially and through active involvement with those fellows who follow in their footsteps.

In our model, the institution acts as more than just the creator of the environment. Institutional commitment to students takes place in an integrated, comprehensive manner during their college years and after graduation.

This integration is the critical element in the commitment strategy. For example, rewarding working students by replacing student loans with grants encourages initiative, personal responsibility, and the positive value of hard work. The postgraduation effects of this approach might include improved financial capabilities and an awareness of the importance of philanthropy. An institution that supports alumni networks provides tangible assistance to help current students and alumni land jobs or find the right graduate program while nurturing continued contact among alumni, students, and the program.

Using this model, we examine the impact of the Cornell Tradition—one of Cornell's most committed programs—by comparing the postgraduate volunteer activities and donations of the program's alumni with those of nonparticipants.

Background on the Cornell Tradition

Launched in 1983 with an anonymous gift of $7 million, the Cornell Tradition was prompted by a concern that rising student debt would discourage many promising students from attending the university, going to graduate school, or pursuing careers in the nonprofit sector. This special recognition program offers 600 fellowships (up to $2,500 per year) to a select group annually of about 150 first-year and transfer students who apply for financial aid (the grant rose to $3,500 in 1998-99). These grants go to needy students who have demonstrated a strong commitment to working while they are in college to pay for their education. Recipients also must be committed to community service and academic achievement. Cornell Tradition Fellows represent about 5 percent of Cornell undergraduates.

The strongest determinant of whether an undergraduate will be selected for the program is the student's work experience. To continue as a fellow, a student must work at least 250 hours annually (200 hours for first-year students), perform a minimum of 75 hours of community service or campus leadership activities, and maintain a minimum 2.3 GPA.

Fellows are made aware of the importance of alumni support by:

- writing thank-you letters to the donors of their named fellowships;
- meeting with alumni and donors informally at reunions and campus events; and

- contacting alumni to discuss career plans, internships, and job shadowing through the Tradition Alumni Mentor Network.

The program also features social, community, team-building, and leadership opportunities. Fellows have a wide degree of freedom in structuring their participation, resulting in a remarkable diversity of experience. Survey research shows that 66 percent of current fellows rate their experience as excellent; another 30 percent rate their experience as good. The Tradition staff also rates highly among fellows, and staff members work hard to maintain close ties with participants.

Because the program offers summer internships and replaces expected summer savings with grants, it serves to "level the playing field" between working students and their wealthier peers by enabling fellows to take unpaid summer positions with nonprofit agencies.

Highlights of the Findings

To avoid positive bias, no references were made to the Cornell Tradition in the survey.

We found that the most important differences between Tradition participants and nonparticipants are in the community service and other hard-to-categorize categories (including religious organizations).

Even from the survey's simple descriptive statistics, a positive picture of the program's success in recognizing and rewarding students who value hard work and public service/participation emerges. This positive picture carries over into outcomes after graduation, when fellows remain involved in community service at a higher rate. We also used logistic regression to look at the impact of various independent variables.

Employment. Among Tradition participants as well as nonparticipants, 76 percent were employed, and one-quarter had earned an advanced degree. Tradition participants were more likely to be in a graduate degree program (40 percent vs. 32 percent).

Student loans. Another important environmental difference between Tradition participants and nonparticipants was the amount of student debt. Tradition alumni had an average undergraduate student loan debt of $5,691, compared to $8,412 for the control group. Because yearly wage income was identical for both groups, Tradition alumni should have more disposable income (assuming all other factors are equal).

Attitudes toward alumni involvement. Tradition alumni were significantly more likely than nonparticipants to express a willingness to invest time and money in programs that would benefit the university and undergraduates.

Postgraduate outcomes. Tradition alumni were more likely to be community volunteers than nonparticipants (63 percent vs. 48 percent) and to be Cornell donors (49 percent vs. 40 percent). About 77 percent of each group were charitable givers to nonprofit organizations other than Cornell University. Tradition participants,

The Survey at a Glance

Purpose: The survey was designed to assess whether participation in the Cornell Tradition has a positive impact on postgraduate behaviors, involving service to and financial support for the university and community.

Sample: Surveys were mailed to all Cornell Tradition participants from the classes of 1990 and 1992 (374) and to a matched control group of nonparticipants (374). The control group was sampled from the same graduating class as the Tradition group based on a stratified random sampling on the basis of gender, ethnicity, college of enrollment at Cornell, and financial aid status. The study was conducted in winter/spring of 1993 and 1995 (three years after graduation).

Response rates: Class of 1990: 55 percent for fellows, 56 percent for control group; Class of 1992: 53 percent for fellows, 57 percent for control group.

however, were only slightly more likely to be Cornell volunteers (26 percent vs. 23 percent). Tradition participants had a much higher mean donation to Cornell ($128 vs. $38), even though they came from families with significantly lower incomes.

Donor predictors. Students who are female, Caucasian, or Asian are more likely to be donors to Cornell than others. Undergraduate involvement in community service and other student activities was a moderate predictor of whether a student would be a donor. The following factors, however, did *not* have a significant impact: involvement in athletics, student groups, the Greek system, or politics; GPA; or Cornell college attended.

Not surprisingly, financial capability (measured by stated income and employment status) seems to be a key factor in explaining gift-giving behavior. An income of less than $20,000 reduced the odds of being a donor by two-thirds.

Interest in investing time and energy in community volunteer activities proved to be a significant predictor of donor behavior.

The odds of becoming an alumni donor were almost 1.5 times as great for Cornell Tradition participants as for nonparticipants. This finding supports our hypothesis that, in comparison with their peers, Tradition participants were more likely to grow into active alumni donors.

One might well argue that students selected for the Cornell Tradition are predisposed to become active supporters, based on their work experience and community involvement in high school. That may be partially true. We would argue, then, that this finding is powerful evidence that Cornell has successfully identified a student's potential to be an effective alumni leader, right from the beginning of his or her undergraduate career. Cornell also nurtured the character of these students along those lines as intended.

Community service predictors. The odds of becoming a community volunteer increase by about 50 percent among Tradition alumni as compared with nonparticipants. Gender is a significant predictor for future involvement in community service (females are more likely to be involved than males); other important predictors were involvement in undergraduate student activities and motivation to make a financial contribution to Cornell.

Alumni volunteering predictors: Among significant predictors were being female, involvement in student extracurricular groups, membership in a sorority/fraternity, and a higher GPA. Other good predictors were having a smaller student loan, feeling strongly about a financial contribution to the undergraduate programs, and involvement in community service.

It was not possible to determine conclusively whether differences in alumni behavior were related to program participation or the result of selection bias. Either the Cornell Tradition was very successful in identifying and rewarding students who possessed the types of qualities it wished to reinforce, or participation in the program created and reinforced behavior in the desired direction. We are exploring this issue in more depth in a study now in progress. The results of our study clearly indicate, however, that participation in the program as an undergraduate produces a statistically significant relationship to alumni giving and other postgraduate behaviors.

Response from Rena Glickstein

Market Research Analyst
Georgia Tech

After five years as a market research consultant, I've been working with alumni relations officers at George Tech since October 1997 on the kinds of research we can do and how it can be used. I'm surrounded by anecdotal information without data to support it. I'd be interested in seeing something more on charitable giving analysis by frequency and amount.

These studies found that the satisfaction level was high among alumni. At Georgia Tech, we are really trying to raise our visibility among students, so I think it would be interesting to look at the current satisfaction level of students and see if there is a significant difference in their view of the undergraduate experience once they graduate. If we're not doing this kind of research, we can't really improve what we do as alumni relations officers.

The description of the Cornell Tradition program was an excellent one, but the program reaches only about five percent of undergraduates. What can we do to reach the other 95 percent to encourage interaction with alumni and recognition of where the donations come from that are critical for a university?

Response from Susan Shaman

Director of Special Projects
Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE), University of Pennsylvania

We are doing some alumni research, so I am particularly interested in the PICURC study because we are collecting data from a variety of institutions. That's the beauty of the PICURC work: Many institutions spend a lot of time in self-contemplation and self-study and don't go beyond to see the wider world and how they stack up. We value COFHE (Consortium on Financing Higher Education) and HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium) enormously because they give us opportunities to do comparative studies and to look at our strengths and weaknesses.

The PICURC study was a fabulous start, but in my mind it raised many more questions than it answered. The real issue when you proudly cite the average earnings of college graduates is to look also at the earnings of people who only completed high school or who began college but didn't complete it. If you look at earnings of college graduates over time, the price of college is really not that huge.

So much of postgraduate education is training. Have we priced students out of the private higher education sector in Pennsylvania in terms of lifelong learning? On the other hand, we might ask why so many people coming out with diplomas need so much training to do their jobs. The question is a little facetious, but it's important. Are college graduates being trained in very specific work-related skills, or are they being retrained in basic skills that the colleges should have provided?

Private higher education in Pennsylvania is doing a great job. But if you can earn $37,000-plus coming out of the University of California, or Harvard, then why make an investment in Pennsylvania private higher education? Income, of course, was only one of the outcomes. Is there a benefit to private as opposed to public higher education?

The study on the Cornell Tradition is an introspective look at a specific program. I read it as a terrific recruitment tool. That's why colleges and universities give students grants rather than loans. I'd be interested in seeing research about yield rates and how grants work as a recruitment tool. That might help determine if a financial gift per se became a long-lasting inspiration or if interventions along the way continued to foster the relationship.

This was very good, very sophisticated research. It's a good idea to repeat this kind of research, to make sure it's continuing to do what it's supposed to do. The lesson we can learn is that there is a very wide variety of research that can be done with alumni data, from large comparative baseline studies to sophisticated model building that tries to tease out the effect of programmatic steps at an institution.

We're seeing the engagement of alumni relations and institutional research. The marriage is soon to follow and may be very long-lasting.

Q&A

What were some of the challenges you faced in marketing the results of your survey?

Jason P. Casey: One of the problems we had was that people wouldn't believe the numbers. Of course, we're working for an association that has an advocacy role for the private sector in Pennsylvania. Once we analyzed our results and found that they were positive, we wanted to get that information out. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* told us that they didn't want to do a story on this and that we should take out an ad to describe our study. An AP reporter in Harrisburg asked good questions, did a lengthy story, worked all weekend on it—and it got squashed by her editor because it was too positive. Some of our rural colleges were able to get a piece in their local newspapers because those papers were more interested in the local institution and the impact it had.

In COFHE studies, we've had some agreements about not publishing information that compares one institution very favorably with its peers. For example, we aren't allowed to say that our institution scored the highest in satisfaction on one element. Was there any agreement in advance among the Pennsylvania private institutions about not using the information to their advantage?

Casey: They did self-police in that way by not saying things like, "We here at College A have alumni who earn $10,000 more than those down the road at College B." We didn't want to go out and tell 46 different stories. We were trying to tell one story sectorwide.

I wondered if you got any input from the alumni offices in your studies. At our institution, we found that when we tried to get the alumni office involved, they were really very uninterested in a survey, even though it included questions that had nothing to do with assessment but had to do with activities. Is there a cultural difference [between alumni and IR]?

Rena Glickstein: It's an education process. It's the [statistical analysis] that loses the alumni relations people. They're challenged in how to use the research. Wonderful things are generated, but they have to understand what they can do with them in their programs. To the degree that IR people design their studies so they don't just hit the alumni people and scare them off, that really helps. We don't always need to do a six-month or year-long survey; we can do other things that are more user-friendly. We're always accused of "paralysis by analysis." The alumni people may say, "It's great that we're doing all this research and coming up with these nice charts, but how is this going to help us serve our mission? How is this going to better help us to serve our alumni?"

Susan H. Murphy: We're just now beginning to build good bridges with our colleagues in alumni affairs and development as the data are beginning to tell a story. But we have clearly changed programs on campus; things that we were doing for (Cornell) Tradition students, specifically, we now do for all undergraduates. We used to do a reception for our alumni donors with the Tradition students. Now, when we have our alumni back on campus, that reception literally involves hundreds of people. Everyone who is a named fund donor—whether for Tradition or general scholarships—is meeting his or her student. So this little group of Tradition students, this little 5 percent, is changing programming.

Michael D. McGuire: There may be a false barrier between alumni research needs and institutional accountability needs that seems to have been broken down. We did not go out of our way to request input from the alumni offices up front. However, the alumni offices are getting very good mileage out of this accountability study. In future research, there will be a much more collaborative atmosphere wherein we seek input up front; on the tail end of it, there would be shared benefits from collaborating.

Jim Trainer: Because HEDS is a membership organization, everything is done by committee. When we developed our alumni survey, we had a committee of people who were themselves representing institutional committees. So there was often little agreement at one institution, let alone consensus across a group of institutions, about what should be included on an alumni survey. On our senior survey, student affairs and academic affairs staff generally have clear interests in assessing certain areas. On the alumni survey, however there were debates about what questions should be included because they were sensitive, or would lower response rates, or there was a fund-raising campaign at the time. In a sense, we were not only designing an elephant by committee but had a committee of elephants designing an elephant as well.

Response from Conan Louis

Associate Vice President for External Relations
Georgetown University

Jim Trainer (director of the HEDS Consortium) and others have referred to AIR and CASE coming together as a marriage. I would call it a marriage not of convenience but of necessity.

It's been my experience that most major decisions in advancement are made on the basis of anecdotal or at best descriptive information. We know what might work at Institution X, but we don't know how it works. Of greater importance, we don't know if it might work at our institution. This conference is a great start, and I congratulate CASE and AIR. Only some of the research presented is directly relevant to alumni relations, however. There is a distinction between research that is relevant to alumni relations and research that has importance to the institution as a whole. To add to the body of knowledge that is specifically relevant to alumni relations, we need to pose research questions that will lead to findings that might be used to inform the formulation of policy or the design of and implementation of alumni programs and services.

The Cornell study has intrinsic value. We learn that the stated interest of alumni in investing time and energy in the university's programs is a significant predictor of alumni donor behavior. As an alumni relations professional, my eyes widen and my pulse quickens in learning about that finding because it causes me to hypothesize that there might be a correlation between alumni volunteer participation and donor behavior. This hypothesis, if borne out by research, would have tremendous implications for alumni relations particularly with respect to its tension-filled relationship with the development function.

With regard to Cornell's Input-Commitment-Environment-Output model, I strongly encourage further exploration. In this study, the model was employed with a clear and focused statement of its research objective to determine whether participation in the Cornell Tradition program had a positive effect on postgraduate behaviors involving service to and financial support for the university and its community. This kind of clarity and precision is exactly what has been missing from the advancement profession.

Isolating the variables in this way helps us answer questions such as how a program works and whether it will work at my institution. It also goes a step further in helping us understand the million-dollar question: What are the implications for the alumni relations function?

Response from David Davis-Van Atta

Director of Institutional Research and Analysis
Carleton College

These were both very good papers, based on sound methodologies and with results that contain potentially useful information. Each study is based on survey research and represents one or more private institutions. An important caveat is in order concerning alumni research at this point in its development. I would be very cautious in taking alumni/development research that represents one institution and applying the reported findings to another institution. The greater the differences between institutions, the stronger the caveat.

Within the next few years, we will begin to develop a body of research-based knowledge about a variety of important issues related to alumni and development. From these findings, we will develop a better understanding of both the commonalities across various types of institutions and of patterns in the differences among them. We do not yet have this body of knowledge, depth, or detail of understanding. For the present and some time to come, therefore, it will be best for each of us to do our own research rather than applying that of others, untested, at our institutions.

Institutional research on alumni and development is essentially at the same point that research on admissions/marketing was in the early 1980s, when we were all looking at an impending decline in the number of 18-year-olds. At that point, IR, admissions, financial aid, and public relations all worked together to create the new science of academic market research: enrollment management. We applied the knowledge we gained about students' and parents' college-choice processes to effective marketing.

Now we are staring over the brink of what could prove to be a financial decline every bit as serious as the demographic one. It has the potential to make just as serious an impact on tuition revenues. And worse, it's more insidious because it is more difficult to see and project accurately than was projecting the 18-year-old population.

The days of rapid increases in tuition—well above the Consumer Price Index—appear to be over. Endowments and state appropriations are not likely to double or triple soon, nor will federal subsidies. That leaves fund raising as the principal revenue source over which we have yet to exercise significant control. Thus, IR almost certainly will be called upon to examine systematically issues related to alumni relations and development.

Fifteen years ago, the marriage between admissions and IR proved to be very fruitful. Rena Glickstein said that IR and alumni relations are now engaged; I believe we're already hitched. The primary question now is: What kind of family will we have? I believe the marriage of IR and alumni affairs will be fruitful too.

Among the interesting findings in these papers, we see evidence that a student's undergraduate experience can have a decided effect on how that individual feels and behaves toward his or her alma mater following graduation. This general finding, if verified—and I believe it will be—will be of far-reaching importance not only in alumni relations and development, but in how we serve our students while they are enrolled.

One example of a result that is probably wise not to apply widely is that female graduates are more likely to be donors and volunteers. Also, the Cornell results represent very early postbaccalaureate outcomes. Further, I would not consider employment and salary as environmental variables—they too are outcomes, or at least intermediate outcome variables between the undergraduate experience and post-baccalaureate philanthropic behavior.

Finally, in much of our research to date, I am concerned about the other 40 to 50 percent of alumni—the nonrespondents to the surveys—who are not represented in our results. Nonresponse is a pervasive problem in alumni/development research. I've been able to learn some things about the roughly 40 percent of people who do not respond to Carleton's alumni surveys, and they are in fact different from respondents in important ways. We usually hear from those who earn Ph.D.s, M.D.s, M.B.A.s, J.D.s, generally, and from those still most bonded to the institution. Nonrespondents appear not to have gone on to such graduate outcomes in as high a proportion. This factor probably makes their career paths, incomes, and—I would bet—some attitudes different as well. Those more disconnected from our schools almost doubtedly have different views from those more connected.

Q&A

There's a lot of opportunity to do comparative data collection out there, whether among public systems, or denominational ones, or various private college associations. What should we be doing to serve alumni affairs interests?

Michael D. McGuire: I want to offer a caveat about comparisons of alumni survey data across institutions. I am always concerned about whether we're comparing apples and oranges.

Could you talk about the spirit of cooperation among the alumni folks in Pennsylvania? Is there really a feeling of sharing methods and results? There seems to be more of a spirit of competition than there is among IR folks.

Jason P. Casey: Our foundation [AICUP] is starting to get into that. Its first goal was to make fund raising more robust. Now AICUP has moved off of that and evolved into building a collegial network among the alumni folks in the 81 private colleges in our association.

If this CASE-AIR group is to continue, we might clarify a set of questions that might be answered in future years. We are nibbling around the edges of the question of what constitutes loyal alumni, and we've related it to fund raising, but we're also saying we'd like predictors of what ties alumni to a school.

Susan Murphy: We're trying to get at that question: Is there anything the institution can do to deliver to you a committed alum who will then be able to give funds? That's a whole different set of analyses than trying to understand the student experience.

How are you relating to the alumni affairs people on campus? Are they interested in this kind of research? Are they going to run with it? Is there anything in your research that is beginning to address how you can better relate this to alumni—those who are giving vs. those who are not?

Murphy: Our linkages with alumni and development folks are just beginning to develop. They're curious about it, and as our data begin to mature, they're getting more interested in it. I think we have some work to do on our own campus, to sit down with our alumni and development folks and say, "Here is what we're seeing; what do we want to do?" There have been glimmers of hope. Cornell has just begun a concentrated effort in the area of young alumni programming. Before, we hadn't spent a lot of time on young alumni. We couldn't find them because they change addresses every six months. They weren't able to give a lot of money and they weren't yet at the leadership levels of our clubs. As this group matures toward its 25th reunion, I think the development office will have a lot more interest in them.

Ideas from Participants

Getting media coverage: Because the press is suspicious of "good news," to provide a hook, consider including a question on the survey that you know will be "bad news."

Reporting results: Break out the "very satisfied" from the "satisfied" categories; otherwise you can mask some problems.

Phone interviews: Be persistent. It may take a dozen tries to get past an answering machine. Often, busy people won't take the time to fill in a mail survey. If you can get through on the phone, they may give you 20 minutes in the evening.

Length of surveys: Stick to the "four-page rule," and keep the type readable. You don't want to send out a "decoder ring and magnifying glass" with the survey, as one researcher kidded he had to do because the type was too small.

Post the results on the Web: A Georgia Tech site summarizing the results of an alumni survey drew 1,000 hits in just three weeks from alumni who wanted to read all about it. Some even sent e-mails to express their appreciation.

CHAPTER 3

Paper 5

When this land-grant university took a look at the "so what" of a degree, it learned some important lessons. Among them: how North Carolina State graduates value their education and how their employers rate the skills and abilities these employees gained through their undergraduate education. Then N.C. State gave the "feedback" a vital loop: It surveyed faculty and administrators to see how they were putting these lessons to practical use.

How a Degree Rates in the Workplace

Building the Campus Impact of Assessment Through a Program of Linked Alumni and Employer Survey Research

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What is the impact of a North Carolina State University undergraduate education, for alumni and their employers, several years after graduation? At N.C. State—a land-grant Research I institution with a large engineering program—we've been conducting a program since 1993 to measure that impact by linking alumni and employer survey research. Our theory is that the impact of the undergraduate program can best be measured by assessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities that connect the academy to the world of work. We also have taken our research a step further by electronically surveying faculty and administrators to see how they were using the survey results to realign, change, or improve their department or unit.

As pressure mounts on institutions to lead a more self-examined life and to assess comprehensively the outcomes of their offerings, the search for valid and reliable indicators of institutional performance has never been greater. In program performance, what is easy to measure may not always be the most meaningful. Fortunately, alumni and employer assessments rank high on believability and utility for faculty and for the state or the university system.

In adopting our approach to surveying alumni and employers, we had three decisive considerations. We needed:

- a way to measure commonalities between undergraduate academic preparation and the world of work,
- a method of assessing the extent of agreement among various raters, and
- an ongoing program of assessment to incorporate into department units and plans the feedback gained through our research.

N.C. State in 1993 had already developed a highly participatory process to assess educational gains from the perspective of alumni and their employers (in this case, their direct supervisors). The process began with faculty focus groups, funded by the provost. The goal was to identify overall issues, topics of interest, and methodological concerns regarding surveys of alumni and employers. University Planning and Analysis (UPA) gathered 59 faculty and administrators for these groups, representing every college and school at N.C. State. This process proved to be an overwhelming success.

Our pilot study, drawing on faculty feedback, featured an identical set of core items on surveys for alumni and employers: skills and abilities gained through our undergraduate program (including computer, communication, and workplace skills) and professional traits and attitudes. The survey asked alumni to report on their level of educational preparation, to rate the current importance to them of N.C. State's goals for undergraduate education, and to indicate how satisfied they were that their own education at N.C. State had met each goal. We also asked alumni about current employment status, further education plans, and suggestions for improvement. In the employer survey, we asked the supervisors of these alumni to rate the knowledge, skills, and abilities of our alumni as compared with those of other employees at the same level.

The Alumni/Employer Study at a Glance

Sample: From the start, we designed the survey so that individual academic departments could look at data from their alumni. We surveyed alumni who had graduated between December 1990 and August 1993 to allow for a large enough sample.

Method: We mailed the survey to alumni in late fall 1995 and to employers the following spring/summer. For alumni, we did two rounds of address checking, sent a prenotification card, included a cover letter from the chancellor with the survey, sent a follow-up card, did other mailings to nonrespondents, and followed up by phone to those who still hadn't responded.

Response rate: This lengthy process resulted in a 51.1 percent response rate from alumni. Then we requested permission from alumni who had participated to survey their direct supervisors; 40 percent of alumni gave us permission. Two mailings were then sent to employers, producing a 67.8 percent response rate.

Highlights of the Findings

In general, employers of N.C. State's alumni report that our graduates are fairly well prepared for the important aspects of their jobs. Both groups rated leadership and management skills as important—but gave relatively low ratings to our alumni in this area. The evidence suggests that supervisors evaluate skills and abilities from a different standpoint than do alumni; thus, we will need to continue to do both kinds of assessments to get a comprehensive picture of student outcomes.

Employers. They perceived general communication skills, particularly listening skills, to be very important to our graduates' current positions. They rated our graduates as better skilled in specific computer, math, and scientific areas than expected for their jobs. They perceived workplace skills dealing with higher-order conceptual and analytical abilities to be important to graduates' jobs, with the highest ratings on problem-solving.

Alumni. They, too, gave listening skills and problem-solving abilities notably high importance. They ranked preparation in leadership and management skills lowest of the workplace skills.

Action Steps

For the campus community, we provided a series of reports on university-wide survey results to deans, associate deans, department heads, and unit heads and published them on the Survey Research Web page. Individual colleges and departments received analyses of data about their graduates, including responses to any questions on the survey added specifically for their alumni.

For administrators, the bottom line in assessment research is demonstrating that assessment is having a measurable and positive effect on education and administration. To find out what impact this study had, we undertook an electronic survey of 80 administrators in January 1998, with a 55 percent response rate. Although we cannot generalize much, we were able to demonstrate the extent to which the survey research program is having a positive effect on the university's ability to become a more self-regarding institution.

On this survey, we followed a national set of guidelines for improving organizational effectiveness: The Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award *1997 Criteria for Performance Excellence.* We asked administrators to rate each component of the survey research program (entering student, graduating senior, alumni/employer) on how the survey data:

- had enabled their unit to assess its performance,
- had been used to realign, change, or improve the unit's performance, and
- had maintained and improved the currency and flexibility of the unit's programs by providing externally generated information.

We also used open-ended questions to allow for benchmarking and to find examples of specific actions taken because of the survey, as well as how the reporting process could be improved.

Almost half (48.6 percent) of the administrators indicated that the alumni/employer survey results were most useful in two areas: determining key programs, activities, and service features and developing or revising strategic plans. One-third of the administrators updated and improved their strategic and action plans on the basis of the survey results. Their responses to the open-ended questions indicated that they used the survey results in three categories: curriculum revision, student advising, and improving planning processes (including planning for reaccreditation).

One unit refined its capstone course; another enhanced the writing/communication components of course work, and a third is reconsidering its undergraduate and graduate curricula in light of what employers want. Another unit said its strategic planning process will now center on how the Alumni Association can focus more on services alumni want, such as continued career planning assistance and professional development. It also funded a half-time position to work directly with alumni to provide those services, including a pilot regional career fair for young alumni in Charlotte (NC) that drew 167 graduates and 23 corporations.

From the outset, one purpose of the alumni/employer survey was to provide feedback on a unit's customers and stakeholders. This goal seems to have been met. For example, one department developed a core course on leadership and group dynamics after learning that employers needed those skills in leading public groups in decision-making.

Alumni and their direct supervisors provide a believable, experienced, and in-depth perspective; that's what makes the survey results useful. As one administrator put it, the seniors and alumni responding have "little to lose by being honest." Another summed up, "Alumni: They are our best evaluators after they've had time to reflect on the value of their education to their lives."

Faculty and administrators especially liked the fact that the survey data could be broken down by departments. They also wanted to see trends compared across time, especially for alumni. To make the data more useful, they suggested inclusion of respondents' written comments, more customized survey questions, simplified presentation of information, continued provision of executive summaries, and posting of data on the World Wide Web.

Lessons Learned

Researchers doing an alumni/employer survey should keep the following points in mind:

- Secure adequate funding and support from the administration.
- Be clear about what to measure, whom to collect the data from, and why it is important data to collect. This analysis could involve reexamining the institution's mission statement.
- Actively seek faculty and employer input on the content of the survey. This strategy gives them a stake, which means they will be more likely to use the results.
- Use a large enough sample size to enable analysis to break down data across departments and units. The information is most useful at this level.
- Let departments and units include inserts to the main survey to collect specific information.
- Do a pilot test of the survey.
- Decide up front who will have access to the data. Make university-level data openly available, but confine department-related data to the respective departments.
- Consider working with peer institutions on cross-institutional studies to enable more benchmarking.
- Keep reports simple. Make reports available on the World Wide Web.
- Begin now: At least three rounds of data are required for trend analysis.

Paper 6

In a study of campuses that were building or renovating alumni facilities, these advancement professionals found that there was a slight economic return, measured by overall alumni giving; that the facilities had an impact on programming; that alumni and annual fund professionals believed that the facilities helped to bring new major donors to the forefront and to increase the numbers of donors overall; that almost no one is measuring the impact of such facilities; and that their project is really just a first salvo in an ongoing discussion.

If You Build It, Will They Come?

The Heart of Campus: Alumni Facilities and the Impact on Alumni Giving and Programming

Gene C. Crume
Executive Director
Western Kentucky University and
Graduate Student, University of Virginia

Jason Embry
Director of Annual Giving
Centre College
and
Donald Smith
Director of Annual Giving
Western Kentucky University

An alumni facility construction boom has been under way on campuses since the late 1980s. More than 60 colleges and universities have constructed a new building or remodeled an existing one in the past 15 years. Why? One common explanation offered by the professionals who raise the money, organize the process, or use the facility after it opens is a perceived increase in alumni giving and programming.

> **"The third and most important element of our quantitative analysis on alumni facilities was alumni participation. As *U.S. News & World Report* relates, that's customer satisfaction. If an institution has an alumni participation rate of 75 percent, then 75 percent of its alumni truly believe in what the institution is doing and were truly happy with the education they received."**
>
> —Jason Embry

Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted that quantifies or qualifies the reasons. Most of the evidence is anecdotal. The largest volume of research comes from surveys conducted by advancement professionals at institutions in the early stages of planning such a facility. Generally, these surveys have a "who's doing what at this time and how" focus.

With today's mega-campaigns, administrators and alumni professionals have been inspired to look seriously at creating a "home" for alumni on the campus. "All great universities have an alumni facility," noted one alumni director, who said her institution's board members and a major donor planted the idea on her campus.

Texas has become a microcosm for this phenomenon. Since 1985, the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, and Southwest Texas State have constructed new alumni facilities or extensively added to existing ones.

Alumni buildings have been in existence since the mid-1800s. The trend started in 1838, when Princeton alumni of two literary societies built stucco and wood, Greek-style temples behind Nassau Hall, a campus landmark. Yale constructed the first alumni "hall" in 1853, and Williams College followed in 1859.

Our research question concerning today's building boom was: Does a new alumni facility affect overall alumni giving or programming in a positive way? In our definition of "new," we included renovation of a structure that previously had another purpose, as well as expansion of an existing facility.

Students today have tremendous choice in selecting a college or university, and institutions are becoming more sophisticated in garnering their market share. Just like cities that build a new stadium to lure a major league franchise, colleges and universities have been building new student centers with all the "bells and whistles." Can institutions and alumni associations justify the millions of dollars being spent on alumni facilities? Or is higher education, like cities that build new stadiums while seeking professional sports teams, relying too much on alumni facilities as economic development tools? The popular assumption has been, "If you build it, they will come." Do the economic and programmatic realities match this popular perception?

The short answer is yes. The qualitative data in our study reveal significant programmatic returns from building a new alumni facility. At a minimum, there is an increase in participation rates and the number of events.

The long answer also is yes, with some conditions. Governing boards, faculty members, and alumni measure institutional success by the number of degrees awarded and the amount of money raised. No one ever asks the question, "How many 'warm fuzzies' did alumni relations create last year?" An institution's vision—and its success in achieving that vision—is based on quantifiable

The Study at a Glance

We began with a list of 50 colleges and universities, diverse in geography and programs, that had built or remodeled an alumni facility since 1980. For each institution, we sought fund-raising information from the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) *Voluntary Support of Education* for a five-year period: the year of construction plus two years prior to and two years after the facility's dedication. We narrowed the sample to the 20 institutions that reported annual data to the CAE and for which we knew the completion date of the facility.

From those 20, we drew a purposive sample of five institutions to study in depth. In these "final five," we looked for institutions that differed in their Carnegie classification or region. The five institutions were:

- a large Research I public university in the South with a new facility;
- a private Liberal Arts college in the north-central region with a remodeled facility;
- a private Liberal Arts Master's university in the South with a remodeled, expanded facility;
- a large Research I public university in the east-central region with a new facility; and
- a mid-sized, public Master's university in the Midwest with a new facility.

We then selected a control group of five institutions, taking into account regional economic factors. Unfortunately, using this control group entailed substantial difficulties. Colleges and universities have diverse alumni programming objectives and, most important in this case, distinctive methods of raising money. Site visits to four of the five "final" schools and three of the five control group institutions made this fact especially apparent. Institutions do not publish quantifiable data regarding the usage and productivity of their alumni facilities. During the site visits, we knew we were no longer comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges.

From the CAE data (for which CASE provides the data reporting standards), we used several categories:

- total gifts to the institution (which we used to find the percentage of alumni gifts),
- total gifts to current operations (in many cases, this figure is the annual fund, especially unrestricted gifts),
- alumni participation, and
- endowment market value.

Alumni participation is a fundamental measure of customer satisfaction and a value of how well an institution does in its alumni relations efforts. Our hypothesis was that alumni facilities would increase alumni relations efforts, which would result in increased alumni contributions.

goals, that we can measure. Over the long term, though, qualitative outcomes will further justify the importance of alumni facilities and will outweigh quantifiable goals.

Highlights of the Findings

Quantitative analysis. Based on our analysis of data from the initial list of 50 institutions, the hypothesis of completed alumni facilities having measurable impact with regard to alumni giving and program participation was inconclusive. In our subsample of 20 institutions, total gifts increased 32.9 percent, but alumni participation declined 2.8 percent. In the year the alumni facility was dedicated, alumni participation increased by an average of 1 percent. One explanation for the increase in total gifts to the institution is that some alumni facilities were built in conjunction with comprehensive capital or special project campaigns. This development partially explains the surge in endowment growth at some of the institutions surveyed.

Our final list of five institutions experienced a 12 percent increase in alumni giving participation over the study period, with a 35 percent increase from year one to year two (year three is the year of construction). A 17 percent decrease in alumni giving participation occurred following the dedication (year three). If the alumni facility was built in conjunction with a capital campaign, the "warm fuzzies" diminished the year following the dedication, perhaps because fund-raising efforts were scaled back or the momentum could not be maintained.

Qualitative analysis. Institutions build alumni facilities for a variety of reasons. They may need meeting space, banquet facilities, overnight accommodations, or office space. The common denominator is that an alumni facility provides a visible icon for the alumni operation while serving as a beacon to welcome alumni back to campus and provide them with a place to call home. It can help the institution raise morale, friends, and funds, as studied and discussed in the previous section. The campus must be committed, however, to providing a strong alumni program to enhance the facility.

At each of the "final five" schools, we interviewed the top alumni professional or designee; at three of the schools, we interviewed the annual fund officers. These individuals indicated that the facility itself may enhance alumni impressions in the short term, but ongoing programming and support from the institution is crucial to long-term success.

The five alumni professionals indicated that qualitative benefits included new surroundings, a cooperative spirit, and a supportive administration. Interviewees were quick to point out that support for an alumni facility depends on support for the institution's overall alumni program. The institution must parlay momentum from a dynamic alumni organization into programmatic capital to produce immediate results from a new facility.

There is no "cookie cutter" model for creating, building, and using an alumni facility. The people we interviewed emphasized the importance of looking at the needs of each individual campus, as well as other institutions, when planning the facility.

The alumni house should capture the heart and soul of the campus experience. Each of the "final five" institutions has a very different facility in terms of size, structure, architecture, and programs, but each building stakes a claim to be the "place of choice" for alumni to visit when they return to campus. The things these facilities have in common also turn out to be the things that make each one unique: libraries, overnight accommodations, elaborate board rooms, computer access for retired faculty, parlors with fireplaces, visitor centers, large patios that can accommodate hundreds of people, walls tracing the history of the school or alumni association, and transplanted campus landmarks.

Our interviews confirmed that alumni professionals have relied a great deal more on collecting qualitative information instead of quantitative data to validate the use and service of the facility. Their comments in support of their facilities could not be more favorable:

- "The alumni house provides one central location that all alumni have in common. It's a symbol of pride, success, and the important role the association will play in the continued development of the university."
- "We now have opportunities to make things happen, whereas before we were inhibited by financial resources or space."
- "No one has said, 'I can't believe you spent my money on this.'"

Action Steps

There is still a great deal of research to be done on this topic.

- The history—why institutions wanted to build these facilities and why they build them—has yet to be explored.
- Building on that research, an extensive qualitative study should be conducted to examine the "warm fuzzies" impact of alumni facilities on alumni leadership and student/faculty morale.
- An extensive, in-depth economic impact study should be done if alumni and advancement professionals are serious about quantifying the returns that alumni facilities provide for an institution.

As the building boom continues, we hope institutions will continue to track their results more carefully to provide a resource and a sense of comfort for the thousands of institutions that will be facing the "to build or not to build" question in the decades to come.

Response from Gertrude Arnold

Graduate Research Assistant
University of Michigan

These two papers demonstrate the range of alumni research, and that's the focus of our conference. They are very different from one another, and that's the nature of alumni research.

In recent years, assessment has dominated the institutional research literature, and perhaps with good reason. The N.C. State paper moves beyond assessment and asks how assessment findings can and have been used to bring about change. That is the real challenge for colleges and universities: Having gathered the data, what do we do with it?

Institutional researchers want their work to be understood. At times, however, we become so occupied with the details of our processes that we lose our practitioner-readers. Hoey and Gardner, in contrast, offer a very clear description of this process. Their explanation is complete and understandable. The real point of their paper is to examine the application of assessment results to improve programs for students. On the basis of their findings, changes were made in the curriculum, student advising, and program planning.

Most scholarly papers include a section on the limitations of the work, tucked in where we hope we won't attract very much attention. These two authors were much wiser: They asked the people who were using the data how it might be made more valuable to them. Instead of hiding the limitations, they laid them out for us under the heading "Lessons Learned."

With regard to the alumni facilities paper: Although I might not have thought of the alumni facility as "the heart of the campus," it does bring back warm memories. The question the authors pose is a very important one.

In reviewing the literature, the authors found little to work with. It's precisely that problem that has generated the need for this conference. We need to have a better understanding of our alumni programming and the facilities that support our programming.

The comparison of an alumni center to a sports facility comes apart for a couple of reasons. First, the connection of alumni to their alma mater exists with or without an alumni center, and alumni programming is likely to go on with or without an alumni facility. Second, revenues from an athletic event are directly related to the purchase of tickets. In contrast, alumni events may be free or of minimal cost and generally are directed toward the long-term financial commitment rather than a one-time revenue.

The beneficiary of alumni giving is the college or university, not just the alumni association. A closer parallel to an alumni association might be an arts foundation or a service group, where the facilities are important only insofar as they engender involvement and support for the larger cause.

The small number of institutions in the sample makes statistical analysis problematic. I question the usefulness of reporting changes in giving and participation only two years after completion of the new facility. The building may not even be paid for yet, and we've already made an assessment about its worth. If I were an alumni director, I'd like to be confident the building would pay off in the longer term.

In lumping together qualitative and quantitative data about the five institutions, we lose their distinctiveness. A comparative case study design would make the study more interesting. If we knew more about the institutions—the range of their alumni activities, the size of their memberships, or even the size of their staffs—we could better understand each of these institutions. And that might help us more clearly look at this question of how the alumni facility affected that institution.

The comments from alumni professionals that close this paper are heartwarming, but they're not surprising. Which of us, if we could have a brand-new office, would not be excited about that, especially after we had raised the funds to build it? If I were an alumni director with a brand-new building, you wouldn't get a negative comment out of me, either. But is there no downside to investing in your facility? Do its benefits exceed its cost?

Clearly, we have to keep doing what we're trying to do here at this conference. By keeping records so there is data to work with, someone can come along behind us and pick up where we leave off.

Response from Janet Kringen Thompson

Director, Alumni and Parent Relations
St. Olaf College

One of the themes I dwelt on was reflecting on improving the ways that alumni can contribute. How do we broaden the scope? Hoey and Gardner should be commended for a project that involved so many different aspects of the college community: faculty, career development, alumni, and so on.

If the value of an institution is education, then allowing alumni to have a direct impact on education is very important. When we've done surveys at St. Olaf—for example, on whether alcohol should be served at certain alumni functions—it's been nice to have alumni input. For alumni, it's affirming to hear from us that they are valued for more than just their money, that they have something to offer us.

Creating new ways for alumni to contribute adds value on both sides. From a practitioner's standpoint, this study opens the door for further involvement with alumni because the workplace and the institution are now connected in their minds. Such efforts may lead to the formation of alumni groups at a company, participation in a career advisory network, or establishment of internships. All of these outgrowths are wonderful.

Another benefit accrues in the language students can now use to market themselves as they look for jobs. Identifying the skills of their education gives them a framework for presenting themselves.

The alumni facility study focuses more on the traditional ways in which we have seen alumni contribute to a college: through their dollars and time. Building or remodeling a facility offers possibilities for involving alumni in planning and decision making. Improving services to alumni is another outcome.

One of the major dilemmas we face is summed up by that comment about what is easy to measure vs. what is helpful to measure. If I wish to implement a new program, increase my staff, or build an alumni facility, specific research with measurable results that can be duplicated is very helpful, of course. We rely on a great deal of anecdotal information, and much of what we deal with is hard to measure. Research that involves other parts of the institution—faculty, admissions, career development, and so on—provides the opportunity to add value to those areas as well.

It would be wonderful to have the opportunity to identify some institutions before they build an alumni facility and to be able to follow through and choose what would be measured. A participation increase in alumni giving that is a two- to three-year blip is very different than substantial and sustained growth over many years, and it would certainly have great impact on what we would do in the field.

Comparing among institutions is difficult. As the authors of Paper 6 mentioned, we all do things differently: We teach differently, have varying mission statements, varying cultures. At St. Olaf, our liberal arts focus is geared to educating the whole person—our mission statement says life is more than a livelihood—so evaluation would be a very different process.

I referred earlier to the difficulty of isolating the impact of something for research. How are we finally going to measure some of these things? Alumni facilities are not built in a vacuum with nothing else going on. Was there already a strong commitment to alumni programs that resulted in the facility being built? Was there strong leadership in the association? How much of the positive impact was the result of a new facility, and how much resulted from programming—or from those very happy alumni directors? If something isn't measurable, how do we evaluate?

I have some thoughts with regard to further collaborations between practitioners and researchers:

- conferences or workshops focusing on content support for those of us who want a specific program and want the backup to convince those we need to convince; and
- workshops on models or methods that have produced specific measurable results that could be duplicated.

Acknowledging institutional differences is something we need to look at. Just as so much alumni programming is moving to market segmentation, that would also be helpful to us in doing research.

How do we do use research? First as a marketing tool for the institution with our alumni, and second in support for specific directions in which we would like to move.

Q&A

The issue I've struggled with is whether employers really have first-hand knowledge of individual alumni. How do you quantify this factor?

J. Joseph Hoey: At the end of our survey, we had a section asking for permission to contact the supervisor. When we received permission—in about 40 percent of the cases—we immediately surveyed the employer. This approach is probably the best way to get direct knowledge of your alumni's knowledge, skills, and abilities. If you send a survey to a human resources rep, it will get filed in the round file, guaranteed.

Let's say I'm the dean of your business school, and I come to you for advice on what to do with conflicting responses from alumni and employees.

Hoey: We did some cross-tabulations to see if there were commonalities, and we found a shocking degree of noncommonality. It became apparent to us that employers essentially view those skills, abilities, and knowledge from a completely different standpoint. There were some areas of agreement on preparation in terms of technical skills, and employers and alumni agreed that our alumni in the workplace were not well enough prepared in terms of leadership and management skills. We're a Research I, land-grant institution—very technically oriented—so these findings are not terribly surprising. What I would tell you is to go back to your industry or community advisory committees and ask them in. Do more than provide lunch. Ask for their honest feedback in helping to interpret these results. That's a real model for bringing the community onto the campus, and it will help you interpret the results.

What kinds of data could we reasonably ask our alumni associations or our alumni relations officers to gather, not just for us, but for this broader research community?

Jason Embry: The easiest place to start would be with some of the easiest data: How many events you do a year, and how many alumni attend? It's quite surprising how many alumni associations don't keep a tally of how many events they do, or sponsor, or provide financial support for, in a year. Institutions with a mature, developed alumni program do a very good job of collecting that information.

You found no causal effect from the alumni houses on annual giving, and the participation rates had been dropping. Should alumni associations continue to build alumni facilities? How would you make the case to your boss if we want one, but we don't have the proof on the other end?

Embry: There is a major effect on alumni programming and annual giving, and it's that qualitative aspect. When you get that letter in the mail saying, "Wow! Wasn't that a great homecoming!" or "What a reunion weekend!" those are qualitative things that have a significant impact on the fund-raising operation. It's the stewardship team, the relationship team, that's undervalued. Trustees look at three measures of an institution; when they're at a board meeting, they ask three things of the president: "How many students did we recruit last year, and how many of them became freshmen? How many graduated after four years? How much money did you raise last year?" They don't ask how great homecoming was, or about how career services is making sure students get jobs. The alumni facility brings alumni back on campus; it's the heart of the campus in that it's a living body, and it gives them a home. The alumni don't just show up at some office building or hotel for a reception.

I almost fainted when Gene said that alumni activity dropped with the building of some new alumni houses. We just opened bids two days ago for our new $8.7 million alumni house at Ohio State. I'm not going to redo my résumé, because I think that drop doesn't have to happen. It has to do with the energy and activity in those facilities and the ways in which the people in them are using those facilities. There might be a letdown right after the facility opens. Thank goodness we do take a little break. That's one possibility. What I think institutional research people can help us do is to determine what kinds of information will help us grow our programs. We can measure lots of things that have absolutely no value but take a lot of time. We have to determine what we need to know to get better. Yes, we'd like to know how many alumni were involved in an activity, but we'd also like to know more about those alumni. We have an extensive travel program. What are the giving patterns of those who go on one of our alumni tours vs. those who don't? What about the giving patterns of those involved in student recruiting vs. those who aren't? Involvement is what we need to track better, so we can see how it affects other types of things.

Hoey: That's a great point. It's one of the reasons we worked on this project. We worked very closely with our development and alumni relations people. We disaggregated our data by race, gender, and age, looking at what kinds of services and programs alumni would value. Out of that research, our alumni association was able to consider some of their programs and services validated, and push ahead on some others they'd been considering. Now that we've done one round, we will turn to them for more feedback. The connection between these two papers is really that institutional research can come up with good sources of data when various units across campus collaborate to look at the needs of our alumni, the needs of our external stakeholders.

Did you go back and have workshops? Or were various units left to their own devices to sort the data out?

A. Hoey: We've published many reports and made them available on the Web. We made presentations to the 137 fund-raising professionals at N.C. State. We presented to the dean's council, to department heads. It takes a lot of time to make the data readable, quite honestly. We've learned to follow the KISS rule: Do a quick, simple report, then put the tables and charts out on the Web for people who really want to look at more than the first two or three bullets that are actionable items. Everybody's looking for actionable items.

The following responses and comments were from the session in which Paper 5 was paired with Paper 13.

Response from Dan Heinlen

President/CEO, Ohio State University Alumni Association

This is somewhat new territory for some of us. I've developed an acronym: WENTOT (We Never Thought Of That). At Ohio State, we have been trying to do a great deal of benchmarking, at least on the alumni side. We had to find a method that we could use to compare events, programs, and activities from time to time.

There's no question that good processes get good results, and I'd like to commend the surveyors on both of these papers (5 and 13).

I hope this is not the end but the beginning of an alliance between our professions of alumni administration and research. In my business of alumni relations, we have a few folks who are very interested and capable of conducting this kind of research, but most of my colleagues do not.

We have a saying at Ohio State: "In God we trust. Everybody else, bring data." More often than not, we are pretty good judges of what sells and what doesn't, what works and what does not. And, we know how to read budgets very well, but we are too often prone to act on intuition rather than on the basis of solid research.

I am not at all surprised by the credibility factor as reported in the Hoey and Gardner paper. I think our alumni are very believable, and employers have a vested interest in being honest as well. If an alumnus has been out of college for a period of time, he will not get his grades changed by being brutally honest.

Although telephone surveying is very expensive, it can provide highly valid information from a fairly small sample. How do we know what to ask? That's where we in the alumni profession need a lot of help. We can measure until the cows come home. The questions for us are: Is it important to know the answers to those things we measure, and how do we correlate the answers we receive? We don't know very well how to do that, particularly on the alumni side. The kinds of things in which we are interested are not easily measurable.

Most university administrations understand money. What they don't understand nearly as well is how alumni activity and involvement affect giving. So if we can find ways to measure effectively the activities and giving patterns of alumni involved on behalf of the university and contrast them with those who are not involved, such useful information will help build effective strategies for growth.

In these sessions, we have been told that department and program heads want bottom-line information; they want to go straight to the tables, to know what all of this research means. They're less interested in how the information was gathered, assuming it was done in a scientifically valid fashion.

For example, in assessing OSU Alumni Association travel programs or conference quality, we use a 1-to-10 scale to ask alumni to give their reactions—shooting for a perfect 10 in all things. If we get an 8.5, we can equate that very easily with a classroom grading scale. Open-ended questions like "How can we make this better?" make it very easy for us to gauge that response and move it to an 8.7 or an 8.9 next time. When we get to a 9.1 or 9.2, it's much tougher to get to a 9.3. The higher the "grade," the more difficult the improvement.

For those who do mail surveys, I want to cite some research an M.B.A. student did several years ago, contrasting first-class indicia and mail-meter imprint vs. first-class stamp. The stamp won in this fashion. The bigger, the gaudier, the more colorful the stamp, the better: With a stamp, the amount contributed was almost 40 percent greater, even though the response rate was the same.

Response from Mary Sapp

Director, Planning and Institutional Research
University of Miami and AIR President

Both of these papers [5 and 13] focus a lot less on the content of the surveys and more on what was done with the results. They also offer a new possibility for administering the survey. This session is a very useful and important complement to the other types of papers presented.

The N.C. State paper had a very good and thorough methodology. This study is part of a comprehensive battery of surveys. Following up the alumni survey with another survey of those administrators who would be in a position to use alumni-survey results is a very important step. All of us in institutional research should be taking this step to find out how people are using our research.

It was disappointing, however, that only between one-quarter and one-half of those administrators responding said they rated the results useful—and that included "moderately useful." In addition, only between one-fifth and one-third of them said they used the survey results to change something. These numbers are disappointing because the percentages would probably not be that different at most other institutions. These are not inexpensive surveys, especially the ones for alumni, and they take a lot of time and effort.

I hope we can talk about how we can encourage people who receive the survey results to use them. For example, if you could convene all users in one room, one user might hear what another is

> **"When you're recruiting, you really should not necessarily be telling students what they want to hear but rather what is accurate about your institution. You want to recruit students who will graduate, and if you're not honest about your institution, you won't have a good match."**
>
> —Mary Sapp

doing and say, "Oh, I can do that." Sometimes the survey results are not obvious to the people who use them. So it's important to present results in a variety of ways—tabular, graphical, and also text.

Beyond that, you have to realize that even if you get statistically significant results, so what? You always need to ask yourself what the results mean in terms of implications for your institution. The institutional researcher should always ask: "If I were in charge of the department or school, what would I do with the results?" In designing the survey, you need to figure out the key questions that allow you to provide data that can be used to change institutional behavior.

Ideas from Participants

Increasing response rate: In the survey letter, mention how the results will be useful to the respondent. That will help boost the interest level of those filling it out.

Alumni in the workplace: Don't survey alumni during their first year out. They're still wet behind the ears, or in training. Survey them two to four years out to see how your recent alumni are faring on the job.

Track data on:

- volunteers—association and club officers, class secretaries, reunion attendance, awards
- numbers of those sending in address changes, visiting the alumni facility, scholarships from alumni, career services, continuing education; and
- giving patterns of those who are active in alumni activities vs. those who aren't.

Longitudinal studies: There is no such thing as a typical alum. Consider taking some long-term looks at demographic and psychographic issues, marketing and lifestyle issues about your alumni.

Benchmarking nationally: Check out the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, at UCLA) baccalaureate and beyond survey. The first follow-up contains a lot of useful national data on alumni.

CHAPTER 4

Paper 7

In this doctoral study, the State University of New York at Albany will be collecting the data to test a new theoretical model to identify the characteristics and experiences most strongly associated with alumni donor behavior. The study will examine the relationships between demographic characteristics, undergraduate academic and social experiences, postcollege attainment, and gift-giving behavior. The model draws upon literature from fund raising, student-institution fit, and educational outcomes assessment. The authors eventually hope to expand their study to include other institutions.

Testing Why Alumni Give

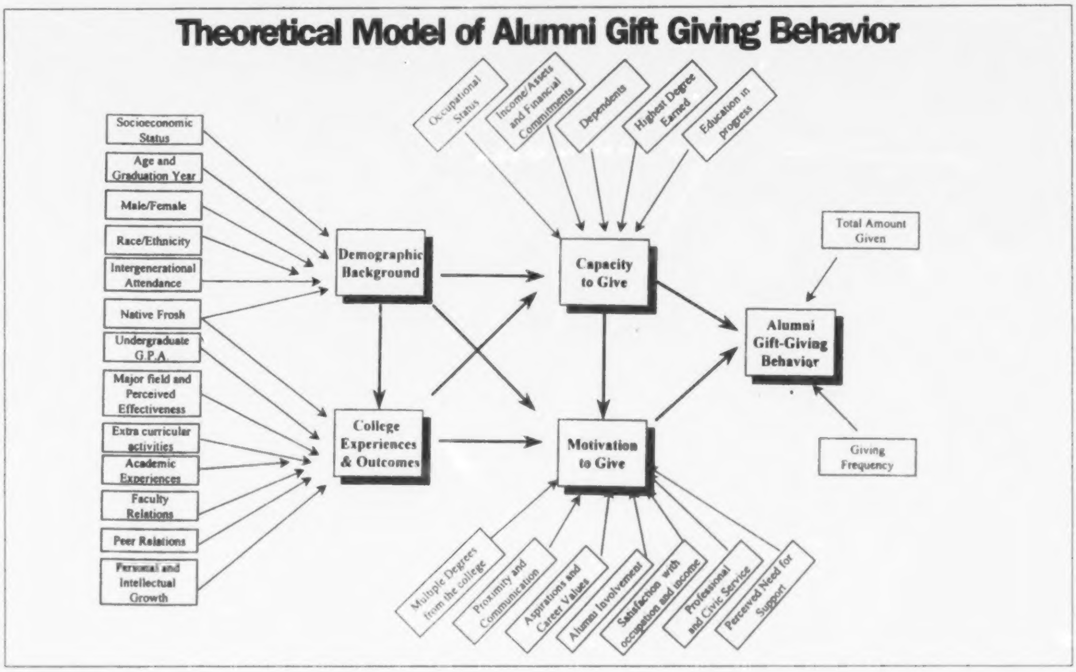
A Model of Alumni Gift-Giving Behavior

J. Fredericks Volkwein
Director of Institutional Resources
State University of New York at Albany
and
Kelli Parmley
Doctoral Student
State University of New York at Albany

For public colleges and universities, alumni generosity often can provide more independence and financial flexibility than can tuition and state appropriations. Private universities and colleges—which are even more dependent than public institutions on alumni generosity—for years have measured educational outcomes and developed methods and systems to maximize potential returns from alumni.

Donor behavior is viewed as a function of motivation and capacity. However, the attitudes and values that produce motivation, and the economic attainment and achievements that produce capacity, are themselves products of the backgrounds and collegiate experiences of alumni.

At the State University of New York at Albany, we are developing a theoretical model of gift-giving behavior to identify characteristics and experiences strongly associated with alumni donor behavior at a public university (Figure 4-1). This study should enable institutions to identify what circumstances affect alumni gift-giving. The results have the potential to inform both undergraduate education and fund-raising practice.



Theoretical Model of Alumni Gift Giving Behavior

Occupational Status
Income/Assets and Financial Commitments
Dependents
Highest Degree Earned
Education in progress
Socioeconomic Status
Age and Graduation Year
Male/Female
Race/Ethnicity
Intergenerational Attendance
Native Frosh
Undergraduate G.P.A.
Major field and Perceived Effectiveness
Extra curricular activities
Academic Experiences
Faculty Relations
Peer Relations
Personal and Intellectual Growth
Demographic Background
College Experiences & Outcomes
Capacity to Give
Motivation to Give
Total Amount Given
Alumni Gift-Giving Behavior
Giving Frequency
Multiple Degrees from the college
Proximity and Communication
Aspirations and Career Values
Alumni Involvement
Satisfaction with occupation and income
Professional and Civic Service
Perceived Need for Support

Figure 4-1

We will gather data for our model from three sources: the 1998 alumni survey, the 1990s alumni database, and student responses to outcomes assessment instruments completed during their enrollment in the 1980s.

We know from the fund-raising literature that donor behavior involves two related attributes—motivation and capacity. *Motivation* includes emotional attachment to one's alma mater, memories of positive college experiences, and concern for the future well-being of the institution. *Capacity* derives from one's financial status and how much an alumnus/a is willing to give. The attitudes and values that produce motivation and the economic attainment and achievements that produce capacity are, in turn, products of alumni background and experiences.

By combining new information with what we already know, our model aims to illustrate the correlation between alumni activities and subsequent support for an alma mater. Moreover, by helping institutions identify the variables that most influence alumni behavior, the model should also

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have a payoff for undergraduate education. The result will be a comprehensive approach to understanding the relationship between precollege days, college experiences, postcollege attainment, and gift-giving behavior.

Drawing from Higher Education Studies

Our model integrates perspectives from two branches of research: Fund-raising literature and college outcomes literature.

Fund-raising literature. A number of researchers have increased our understanding of donor generosity over the years and have developed ways to maximize returns. Among the valuable studies for this model are:

- a conceptual framework for donor behavior based on microeconomic principles;
- application of market concepts to higher education;
- a computer program that projects solicitation targets largely on the basis of decade groupings of alumni;
- a practical framework and methodology for gathering detailed data about the traits of givers compared with nongivers; and
- recent work that uses an alternative approach to alumni gift-giving by considering reunion, class, and fiscal-year effects on class giving.

Proposed Study at a Glance

We will assemble the most current data to test this model through an alumni survey with an anticipated completion date in 1999. The mailed survey instrument will address issues relevant to campus experience, postcollege employment, and past donor habits that could affect future giving. Using available data, the model will identify alumni donor behavior by taking into account correlations among such factors as prior gift giving, demographics, undergraduate academic and social experiences, and postcollege employment.

College outcomes literature. If alumni gift-giving is shaped by motivation and capacity, these factors are shaped at least in part by college experiences and outcomes and in part by precollege characteristics. The most widely studied model in the college outcomes literature claims that student persistence and growth depend on the degree of successful integration into the academic and social structures of the institution. A series of studies also emphasizes the importance of family, friends, and precollege traits. Complementing these models is a perspective focusing on the importance of student involvement and effort.

> **"I'm not sure we've arrived at the magic bullet yet, but we're going to see in this latest round of data collection how these measures hold up and whether they tell us anything."**
>
> —J. Fredericks Volkwein

Another perspective links precollege characteristics and college education to economic attainment and occupational achievement. Building on these frameworks, a path model assesses the contribution of various precollege characteristics, institutional characteristics, and campus experiences to the socioeconomic achievements of a 1980 population that entered college in 1971.

Action Steps

The model has great policy and practical ramifications. In testing the model, we may find that some variables are more predictive than others. It would be very useful to know that some traits and experiences exert a greater influence on alumni behavior than do others.

If the model's validity is confirmed, it will show campus managers and faculty the clear connections between their actions and programs and subsequent support for the institution. Such information enables faculty, administrators, and fund raisers alike to shape daily campus experiences in ways that support the long-term financial health of the institution.

Paper 8

Dedicated staff, energetic volunteers, and loyal alumni are all critical to MIT's fund-raising efforts. But there's more to the success story: consistent use of data-rich alumni records. Over the past two decades, the volunteer board and professional staff have mined these records to set fund-raising goals, solve problems, create and evaluate programs, and justify expenditures. This paper describes how MIT collects and uses its data. It also features three different research approaches that have helped MIT understand the "behavior" of the annual fund and its contributors.

The Data That Drive MIT's Success

Fund Raising from Alumni

Joseph S. Collins
Director, Operations and Alumni Fund
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
and
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Director, Special Projects
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

It won't surprise anyone that MIT's fund raisers make judicious use of research, based on alumni data collected over many decades. For half a century, the MIT Alumni Association has been responsible for soliciting contributions to the annual fund, known as the Alumni Fund. The Alumni Association staff reports to a volunteer board of directors, and the association's work is fully funded by MIT. The Alumni Fund Board, appointed by the association's directors, is responsible for setting goals for the Alumni Fund.

A few house rules:

- Gifts reported in the Alumni Fund are a record of *all* alumni giving (cash only), not just unrestricted, current-use gifts.

- The records also include matching gifts, nonalumni parents, and other friends.
- For reporting purposes, we use a cap of $100,000 per individual for the crediting period.

In 1980, the Alumni Fund reported $5 million from 20,000 donors. The 1997 results were $26.6 million from 30,577 donors. This growth in a little more than 15 years resulted from a thoughtful, conscious process of feedback through sophisticated analysis of giving patterns.

How MIT Sets Goals and Monitors Results

In the wake of the tumultuous 1960s, annual giving at MIT in the 1970s experienced a stagnation in the number of donors and a decline in the percentage of participation. As the decade wore on, members of the Alumni Fund Board expressed concern and began to look for rational explanations. Among the questions they asked were:

- How do the participation rates of recent graduates compare with the participation rates of those who graduated a decade or two earlier?
- How does giving by alumni with MIT bachelor's degrees compare with those whose first MIT degree is a graduate one?
- How may prior-year donors (LYBUNTS) give the following year?
- Beyond dollars and number of donors, what should the goals be?

With a staff turnover in the Alumni Fund in the early 1980s, a new director began to establish one-year and five-year goals. Our data revealed the following:

- The alumni base was growing rapidly (1,000 a year), with graduate-degree alumni growing even faster than bachelor-degree alumni.
- Participation rates for alumni varied over time: between 40 and 50 percent for undergraduate alumni and between 28 to 32 percent for those with an advanced degree from MIT.
- Annual growth in total donors depended on repeat donors: a conversion rate of 80 percent of the prior year's donors usually ensured an increased number of donors.
- The conversion rate for sometime donors (SYBUNTS) decreased significantly as the time since the last gift increased.
- First-time donors were important, especially from the five most recent classes.

The new information led to new goals and resource allocations. The staff upgraded gift objectives at the $100+ ranges and set a "net" annual donor growth rate of 500 alumni per year for FY80-84. A tactical shift resulted in putting more resources into phone solicitation and less into direct mail and an emphasis on recent alumni. This latter effort involved working through the Young Alumni Program and linking graduate-degree alumni to their academic departments.

As donors results were monitored, we found, for example, that we could significantly reduce the resources expended to solicit greater than five-year SYBUNTS through direct mail and phone calls. A survey of alumni who had not made a gift in five years or more revealed that 70 percent of them were unlikely ever again to make a gift because they simply weren't interested.

Goal Setting in the Late 1990s

Our goals continue to be:

- LYBUNT conversion (80 percent target),
- a target of 5,000 or so SYBUNTS, and
- a strong number of first-time gifts.

We track results on a weekly and quarterly basis, and we do three-year weekly comparisons on a variety of measures. In setting five-year goals, we take into account "good" and "bad" fund years. In this way, we establish realistic goals backed by appropriate strategy.

Linking Alumni Involvement and Annual Giving

It is an axiom in alumni relations that effective alumni involvement programs are necessary for successful fund raising from alumni. Many an alumni director has sought to demonstrate this connection.

At MIT, as at most schools, fund raisers typically ignored alumni relations, focusing instead on vigorously and creatively finding new and better ways to ask for gifts. Following the 1988 merger into one alumni activities group under a director of alumni activities (who also was director of the Alumni Fund), we knew we had to understand better the relationship between alumni involvement and alumni support.

> **"Years ago, we asked alumni if giving them a token of recognition [valued at $10 for a $100 gift] would make any difference in their giving, and they said, 'Absolutely not.' We went ahead and did it, and the evidence showed that it made a lot of difference."**
>
> —Diana Tilley Strange

In the past 10 years, our annual fund participation has been strong (eighth among research universities for undergraduate alumni). Furthermore, alumni involvement is a high priority: 8 percent of our undergraduate alumni and 2.5 percent of graduate-degree-only alumni hold volunteer positions. When we tested our assumption that there is a positive relationship between this exemplary record of alumni giving and the outstanding commitment of involved alumni, however, we were disappointed to discover that involved alumni were no more likely to be donors than were the general alumni body.

We then decided to test the assumption that there would be a correlation between "quality" giving and involvement among alumni. (We defined "quality" giving at three five-year cumulative levels: $500, $1,250, and $5,000). There was indeed a strong relationship between alumni activities and annual giving behavior. For alumni who are regional club members or attend events, there was an even higher correlation than for volunteer activity. This result suggests—as the anecdotal evidence sometimes tells us—that some volunteers may give time and not money. Although this research does not show any causal relationships between involvement and giving, the high correlations confirm that the behaviors go hand-in-hand and should be encouraged.

Case Study: Translating Research Into Action During a Campaign

Face-to-face contact is the best means to seek upgraded gifts from donors who contribute a higher than nominal amount. In 1987, MIT proposed the Alumni Fund Visit Program, to be conducted over the five-year capital campaign (FY88-92). In the end, the results were better than expected. It featured:

- 71 geographic campaigns, including four in Europe (compared with 52 planned campaigns),
- 550 volunteer solicitors (the goal was 850),
- 2,100 alumni donors contacted (we had hoped for 2,700),
- $4.3 million in gifts (far surpassing our goal of $750,000), and
- an upgrade rate of 67 percent.

Other Highlights from Our Research

Consecutive givers. Comparing graduate-degree alumni with their undergraduate alumni counterparts in 1981, we found that the probability of giving in several consecutive years is the same for both groups. Because the graduate-degree alumni base is growing at a faster rate, increasing the number of first-time gifts from graduate-degree alumni and working hard to make them habitual annual donors are keys to success in raising donor totals.

One-on-one solicitations. Prior to the Alumni Fund Visit Program, we conducted five face-to-face programs in FY80-84 in different cities, in which we solicited donors of $100 or more. The upgrade rate exceeded 60 percent—far better than the 25 percent rate from phone solicitation. A careful audit determined that once an upgraded gift is made, most contributors will stay at the increased level.

Postcampaign giving. Following a drop in total donors during the campaign campaign (FY93), a special telethon over the next year increased donors to 30,577 (up from 27,000). Key factors were a prior donor conversion rate of 79 percent (up from 77 percent), 5,086 sometime donor gifts (up from 4,378), and nearly reaching our goal of 1,500 first-time gifts (up from 1,037).

Delayed giving. Although many alumni who have not donated in the past five years are unlikely ever to donate again, we never entirely drop our efforts to solicit from them because 30 percent of those who have discontinued indicate they have done so only temporarily.

Tracking. Our annual fund methodology established in 1980 is still in operation. Indeed, the measures for setting goals and assessing progress are now so ingrained that staff tend to forget that they were once research findings. To this day, we track results regularly according to a variety of measures:

- overall participation by alumni donors only;
- participation by donor type;
- donors at targeted gift levels;
- total alumni funds; and
- total dollars from all givers.

Action Steps

Among the principles that MIT fund raisers have established as a result of our research are the following:

- Focus on repeat and sometime donors.
- Increase resources for graduate alumni giving.
- Strive for first-time gifts, especially from the five most recent graduating classes, and strive to make them repeat donors.
- Rely on face-to-face contact as much as possible, especially when reaching out to people who repeatedly make high-level donations.

To continue to provide fund raisers with the necessary research support, we are now revamping our alumni database (the structure of which has changed little since 1979). We expect to convert to a client-server platform. The flexibility of this new system should facilitate even better analyses and produce continued outstanding results.

Response from John Wissler

Executive Director, Alumni Association
Boston College

When I came into this work, I had some questions about how to measure the effectiveness of my programs. I found there was no data. Here we are 30 years later, only beginning to talk seriously about measuring effectiveness in programs and how alumni programs and fund raising go together.

In these theoretical models, we've talked about motivation, capacity, emotional ties, and other factors. We can be connecting on all these levels, yet at any time that relationship with alma mater can be severed by one incident—maybe at a football game or being treated poorly at the front gate. These incidents affect the way alumni feel about their school and can immediately shut off the fund-raising stream from that individual. Unfortunately, I think that happens more than we'd like to believe.

A colleague of mine came back from a marketing association meeting with the results of a survey on how students evaluate their professors. Students were given three criteria: friendliness, knowledge of subject, and reliability. The number one criterion was reliability—whether the professor follows a syllabus, holds office hours, and so on. Right there, we are talking about students we hope to engage as alumni and we hope will be donors. At the academic level, we are really engaging with that student in a provider and customer relationship. Faculty members do not want to hear that they are in the business of providing services, but they are.

That faculty-student relationship affects what kind of alumni the students are going to be. As an alumni director, I had very little control over that relationship. But then they graduate, and we provide them with a wider array of services. Career services are number one. If we give them good career services the first time they look for career help, we have made a very good connection with a graduate. If we don't, that failure could hurt us for the rest of that person's life.

We are in the people business. I have some experience at fund raising, although I have no direct responsibility for it. I say I'm a freelance fund raiser. When alumni tell me, "I really haven't had much to do with Boston College," and they really didn't care much about it, I have a clincher of a question that evokes a positive response: "Surely there must be one person at Boston College, one professor or one staff member, who made a difference in your life, who helped you get ahead?"

I don't think there's anybody who can't answer that question positively. Maybe there was a professor who made that student rewrite an application for Harvard Business School four times; the student got into Harvard and had tremendous success. Those are the relationship things. I think they are important.

The MIT survey put down on paper something that has been quite an issue at various times in my 30 years: whether the alumni fund should be part of the alumni association office. Laying the Boston College template on this discussion, we would probably be better off if the fund were part of the alumni association office.

I have not found that we've been able to have a truly cooperative relationship between the development and the alumni association offices. I honestly think there are development people who have not been educated to the sensitivities of dealing with alumni.

When the development staff comes to talk to me, they want to find out about the alumni association so they can tell me how they're going to exploit "my alumni." I want to ask them how involved they are with the alumni association at their school and whether they support their own alma mater financially. In many cases, they are offended by my questions. I think those are very reasonable questions to ask somebody who's going to go out and ask my alumni for money.

The MIT paper also reinforced for me the need to reach these alumni while they're young. I'm not sure we do that all the time.

We have not talked much about gender differences. We have a marked difference. Women have been engaged fully in Boston College only in the past 20 years. There is definitely a different attitude. We're exploring that area now.

Years ago, Boston College had a large commuter population. Now we are almost 100 percent residential. There is a difference between the two, and that does affect the level of giving.

Boston College is still identified as something of an Irish-Catholic school. There does seem to be some correlation between ethnic background and level of giving, perhaps related to the level of success or how many generations have been in the United States.

It has been difficult to get some people to give who very much have the capacity to give. In my retirement speech, which will be given shortly, I'm going to take one shot that I've never tried in 30 years. I'm going to say I do not understand how Boston College alumni can have their diplomas on the wall and their Boston College chairs in their houses and go around town acting like they are Mr. or Ms. BC, when I know they don't give to Boston College. That absolutely puzzles me.

As alumni directors, we are definitely in the alumni giving business, but we are also leading associations that we hope are training alumni who are ambassadors for our schools, good representatives who are attracting more students to our schools because they themselves had a good experience at Boston College. I love that school.

Response from Larry Litten

Director of Research, Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE)

One of the things this session cannot be accused of is a narrowness of prospective. We had Fred Volkwein take us to the heights of theory and the MIT people take us right down into the trenches of operational data. I find that jousting position really interesting and very provocative—and (I hope) for our discussions to follow, very productive.

If we could just get Fred's model of alumni gift-giving behavior enacted into legislation, I'd consider it a full employment act for institutional researchers for a good long time. For example, look at just one box of his findings: extracurricular activities (see page 60). There are activities on campus where students are just spectators—but perhaps they do forge the kinds of identification that may lead to the outcomes Fred is interested in measuring.

Then let's think about the arrow from the box—how does this box have an effect? For example, does intense participation in a particular extracurricular activity foster a kind of identification with the school? I suspect so. This is a complex box and a complex arrow.

Several kinds of instrumental relationships might be represented by the arrow Fred draws in his model from extracurricular activity to giving. Does a relationship between these two phenomena represent other kinds of personality traits? For example, an impulse to activism (not political activism, but just being involved): How do we get beyond these activities and socioeconomic characteristics to think about psychological orientations that may explain much of what we observe?

I'd suggest two additional boxes to think about. One is alumni involvement. It would be nice to measure exposure to different institutional initiatives, efforts to get alumni involved. What works with what kind of people under what circumstances? Another is the final dependent variable: Everything is leading up to the amount of giving and the frequency of giving. Fred even alluded to giving in relationship to capacity. That might be interesting to explore—who's really giving as much as we can expect them to give?

In his paper, Fred suggests something we didn't have time to get to here: the personal solicitation phenomenon. It does deliver better results. Is it because someone personally solicited donors or because the people chosen for personal solicitation were predisposed to be responsive? The same kind of question applies with regard to solicitations through phone calls vs. personal visits. Fred has brought up some interesting things for discussion.

Not everybody is going to be able to do this mammoth omnibus survey. If we were to think about four or five key relationships, which one would we zero in on first?

We've seen from the MIT study that graduate-degree alumni seem to differ from undergraduate alumni in their giving. Is there anything in the model that might explain why that's happening?

Kent Rollins made reference in an earlier session to "WAG" (Wise-Ass Guesses). I'd strike the A from "wag." Wise guesses do count. There is something to be said for intuition and art and sensibilities. We need to continue to test the limits of the research we're focusing on here and see where sensibility counts, where intuition provides the payoff. In alumni relations, we need to keep both kinds of sensibilities active and be concerned about where we draw the balance.

With regard to the MIT paper, it's always useful for those of us in institutional research to be exposed to the jargon of another profession, particularly if we're going to work with its personnel. LYBUNTS and SYBUNTS are new to me. It's also useful to have some new perspectives on which data are meaningful. For someone in IR evaluating dining services, a 3-percentage-point difference is not going to make any difference in the delivery of dining services. A 3-percentage-point difference in an annual fund, though, might mean thousands of dollars.

As we continue to work with you, you're going to have to educate us about what's really important—as we try to keep you honest about what you're experiencing, why things are the way they are, and how they might be.

Note: The following two responses are from the session in which papers 8 and 10 were paired.

Response from David Fagerlie

Executive Director of Alumni
University of Washington

Eleven months ago, I was elected executive director of the alumni association at the University of Washington, so I now have a good 11 months of experience in higher education.

Concerning the MIT experience, I would like to focus on the value of research and response as a means of conducting business. Too often, important research is banished to a dusty shelf in a dark room. Our response to research produces value. The MIT staff did not merely rely on what might have felt right, nor did they file their research on a dusty shelf. They systematically applied what they had learned, and their systematic effort paid off handsomely.

MIT redesigned its approach to annual giving in response to a crisis: the lowered participation rates brought on by the 1960s. So often innovation is born from crisis. I wonder where MIT's fund-raising achievements would be now if it had adopted a research and response approach before there was a crisis. Waiting until there is a crisis certainly makes a situation more reactionary. Are interventions less effective? Would a more timely as well as methodical approach have produced greater rewards?

I'm not suggesting that MIT should have been able to foresee the social and behavioral changes that took place in the 1960s. I am suggesting that there is a lot to be known about changes in our environment and how alumni are affected by those changes or effect those changes, but we need to probe more deeply and more systematically for that information. In less than a year in this business, I've learned that our institutions have never felt more deeply the need to raise more money from alumni. Waiting until the crisis thickens seems so often to be the method by which people change or change the way they do business. Is there a way to more effectively encourage deans, administrators, alumni directors, and fund raisers to embrace research and response before a crisis exists?

There are environmental differences among our institutions. How can MIT's experience be adapted to the unique circumstances of our organizations? MIT found that involvement had almost no causal relationship to one's decision to make a gift—although it did influence the size of one's gift. What does that say for how we support our universities through alumni programming?

Face-to-face requests were more effective than telemarketing, which was more effective than direct mail. This hierarchy is no surprise to those of us who have fund-raising experience. What does this say to those of us in alumni relations work about supporting the development effort? How can we increase our effectiveness, and therefore our value to our universities, by mobilizing alumni involvement?

Response from Joseph Pettit

Vice President for Planning
Georgetown University

Pettit contributed to the discussion by posing a few questions:

Joseph Pettit: At MIT, how has the research changed who conducts the phonathons? Is it students, paid staff, or alumni volunteers?

Joseph A. Collins: We do both. We have about 1,000 callers in a year—400 students, 200 alumni, and then paid student callers. Let's say the mix is half paid and half volunteer.

Pettit: In what forms has your research been shared with potential volunteers, either students or alumni? Have you explained why you do things and clarified the fact that the research is database driven?

Diana Tilley Strange: The goals committee of the annual fund knows these data. It's been a two-way street as far as volunteers are concerned.

Pettit: At Georgetown, much of our effort for the annual fund is related to the reunion cycle. You seem to have had reunions only for a few of the most notable years. How do you relate geographic and year-after-year giving efforts to reunion solicitations?

Collins: One reason we did a geographic, face-to-face program is because we didn't have as much reunion giving at that time. Geographic fund raising is a lot harder. We have shifted in the 1990s to having a reunion gift for every reunion class because that's a far friendlier way of seeking increased gifts. We have shifted our resources out of the geographic program and into the reunion giving program.

Pettit: I'm glad you clarified that.

Strange: We've brought a strong annual giving methodology to reunion giving. We still think people ought to be giving every year, and we still concentrate on that annual LYBUNT conversion rate. The reunion giving is a tool mostly for upgrading.

Q&A

(from several sessions)

I'm an alumni director. We want to know our customers and then respond to them—what I would call the market research approach. Fred Volkwein's approach is empirical, a very deep survey. As he gets his results back, how much of that relates back to what I need to know tomorrow so that I can be responsive to my alumni needs?

J. Fredericks Volkwein: I'm not sure I can answer you directly, but let me share a few thoughts. One of the reasons we are moving in this research direction at Albany is because much of the fund-raising activity has been founded not on research and certainly not on the social science literature but more on practice. We are very much interested in testing this model and seeing the extent to which some of these social science concepts have to do with socioeconomic attainment and the impact of college on students. One of the side benefits of this work has been the integration of the institutional research activity with the fund-raising and development activity on campus. We've learned from each other, and it's been a very important culture-building activity.

Larry Litten: Fred's missed an opportunity to plug his other paper (paper 15). I think he does provide an answer in that paper to part of the question. What are the things that satisfy? He's discovered that academic experiences satisfy—or lead to, or associate with, satisfaction—more strongly than some social experiences. To the extent that we can use things like Fred's model and get the data, we're going to find that some things pay off more than others: maybe things we want to cultivate more on campus, maybe just themes we want to pitch more when we make our appeals to people. Sure, let's go out and try to find the answers, but the questions we're asking and the way we refine our questions by doing the research are the really important factors. All researchers would say that research provides answers to questions. I would submit that you also do research in this particular field to show that you're interested in the people with whom you're doing the research. It's a way of expressing interest and concern. Now, you can get to a point where the tail wags the dog. The big question is, to what extent can you use research for relational purposes? How can you make sure it serves those purposes well? I can see that asking a lot of people a lot of questions—but never delivering any evidence that you are paying attention to them—makes them really mad, madder than if you had never asked the questions in the first place.

My institution still lags in student aid. I believe that's a serious impediment to alumni giving in their first few years out. I believe they think that by paying back their loans, they are giving.

Volkwein: That's a really interesting researchable question. A lot of financial aid officers are worrying about it right now, too.

Universities need to rethink and redefine what an alumni relationship is if we want them to remain involved in the life of the university. I think the universities need to somehow demonstrate that they're remaining involved in and relevant to the lives of the alumni.

Volkwein: The advantage of having a model is that it gets you started down the road of doing that kind of hard analytical work. We're using an outcomes assessment model that we developed for our undergraduates, and we are trying to apply it to our alumni. The next step is to see whether those kinds of models also apply to graduate students and graduate alumni. All of this work may result in a proliferation of models and a proliferation of research opportunities for IR. I think it is eventually going to give us a much richer array of information on which to base our various practices.

What predicts the likelihood of being a donor? People are likely to give because they have the capacity, they've been involved, they've had a good experience in college. If nobody's asking them, or if they're not being asked in a way that they believe makes a difference, they're not going to be giving. So where does "the ask" fit into the model?

Volkwein: It really relates to their motivation to give. If this model were applied across a variety of institutions, I would expect to see some huge differences based on the relative sophistication of the alumni activity and the fund-raising campaign. What I think the model will do is help us determine whom we should ask and with whom we will probably have the greatest success in asking. In a world in which costs and benefits are applied to all activities, we have to make our fund-raising efforts as efficient as possible. We want to get information from a model like this that will help us increase the efficiency of our activity.

We've all been told for 20 years by the student affairs staff and the literature that what happens to students outside the classroom is just as important as what happens inside the classroom. At least at Albany, we're learning that what happens inside the classroom and the student interaction with the faculty have a huge impact on all of the outcomes that we think are valuable and beneficial. The social experiences fade into insignificance. They are not nearly as important as the academic experiences. This is valuable information, for it tells the president and vice presidents where we get the most bang for the buck.

We've been tracking alumni involvement at the University of Pittsburgh for the past six years. Under voluntary involvement alone, we have 350 affinity codes or variables in terms of modes of engagement. How do you sort out all this data? Are there four or five variables that you think are really going to make a difference?

Volkwein: That's why we have a model that has all of those variables in it—because at this point we honestly don't know. Sure, we have some ideas that maybe all of these variables might be significant influences. Right now, though, we're being open-minded in trying to see which ones do.

Over the past 5 to 10 years we have been engaged in data-reduction techniques to refine our measures. From 120 measures, we have developed ways of combining them into scales—for example, extracurricular activities (from no involvement up to intensive leadership involvement). Similarly, on the alumni involvement side, we have a variety of data points—whether they attended a reunion, how many years they've been active volunteers, and so on. For alumni, we have developed a 10-point scale for the intensity, frequency, and depth of their involvement.

When I consulted, I spent a lot of time telling clients that the best predictor of where your major gifts will come from is usually right in front of you. Rarely does a donor come from nowhere. The relationship you have with a donor is a continuum. I don't see that you have past giving as a predictor of future giving.

Volkwein: That variable is in the model. It's not evident in the paper, I grant you, but it's certainly in our database. And we plan to have past giving and frequency of giving as key variables.

CHAPTER 5

Paper 9

The Tufts veterinary school has established an annual assessment to monitor how well its curriculum works in practice. By surveying students, faculty, alumni, and the veterinarians who employ its alumni, the school creates a way to address areas that need some extra attention. Alumni are key in understanding if a program weathers the test of time.

Real-World Realities for Vets

Alumni as a Component of Assessment

Dawn Geronimo Terkla
Executive Director, Institutional Research
Tufts University
and
Kelli J. Armstrong
Director, Institutional Research
Massachusetts Board of Higher Education

Colleges and universities are being required regionally and nationally to develop outcomes assessment measures and put in place long-range assessment plans. The 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act requires outcomes assessment for institutions receiving federal funds. Accrediting agencies have incorporated outcomes assessment language into their standards. On the professional front, the American Veterinary Medical Association Council on Education has added outcomes assessment to its policies for accreditation for all veterinary schools.

In view of this changing landscape and increased need for greater accountability, the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine (TUSVM) in 1993 formed an outcomes assessment committee. Its goal was to establish a cohesive, comprehensive program to:

- assess the teaching program,
- provide baseline comparison data for newly revised curricula, and
- design a continuous system of outcomes assessment.

Faculty members, administrators, private practitioners, alumni, and institutional researchers served on the committee (the student representative usually had conflicts and couldn't attend). To give the effort a wide perspective, the committee decided to gather data from:

- all alumni,
- employers of veterinarians (including those who hire our graduates but not limited to that group),
- all faculty members, and
- entering and exiting students.

The Voice of Our Alumni

In a comprehensive assessment effort, many voices within an institution are needed to provide a thorough understanding of curriculum effectiveness. Our alumni offered a special perspective because they could offer opinions on how well our curriculum applies to their practice. The committee hoped alumni could answer two fundamental questions:

- Was the curriculum configured effectively?
- Do you possess the skills needed to become successful practitioners?

TUSVM is a young institution whose first class graduated in 1983. Our curriculum evolves every year. The alumni voice can become less useful with graduates from earlier years. On the other hand, alumni offer the only testimony to the curriculum's ability to weather the test of time. The participation of alumni proved especially important in the area of curriculum reform. Although this paper focuses on alumni in this one effort, we have found that using our alumni in assessment research has proved a powerful tool for other issues at Tufts as well.

Gathering feedback from employers helps us evaluate our graduates' training in comparison with that of other veterinarians in the field. Like alumni, employers also test and measure a TUSVM education.

Developing the Survey by Committee

Having a broad-based committee create a survey (as we chose to do) can be a slow, laborious endeavor. On the other hand, it offers some advantages: It allows stakeholders to arrive at a consensus, it creates more interest in the results, and it prompts more serious consideration of the recommendations.

The committee's goal was to develop parallel survey questions for each group, where possible, to measure differences in populations. We gathered data on:

- employment,
- curriculum evaluation,
- rating of the quality of the school's training,

- evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses,
- overall satisfaction, and
- general background of respondents.

We also asked questions relevant to each group's area of expertise or perspective. For graduates, these topics included:

- employment history,
- professional involvement,
- postgraduate training, and
- educational debt.

For employers, these topics included:

- levels of satisfaction with our graduates and graduates of other veterinary schools,
- reasons for not hiring our graduates, and
- assessment of how the school addresses the concerns of their professional area.

The Survey at a Glance

Sample: 3,362 total. Alumni: 618; employers: 2,538; faculty: 63; exiting students: 64; entering students: 79

Method: Mail surveys, which included some open-ended questions, along with a letter from the dean and a postage-paid reply envelope. We also sent reminder postcards and a second, follow-up mailing of the surveys.

Response rate: 68.2 percent overall. 64 percent from alumni; 17 percent from employers; 86 percent from faculty; 78 percent from exiting students; 96 percent from entering students.

Highlights of the Findings

From alumni:

- 87 percent reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current position.
- 87 percent would again pursue a doctor of veterinary medicine degree; of those, 82 percent would do it again at Tufts.
- 61 percent said the major strength of TUSVM was the quality of education. These respondents cited supportive faculty and staff.
- Alumni cited weaknesses in certain areas of clinical training and high educational debt (though most respondents indicated that they were handling their debt well).

From employers:

- 73 percent reported being satisfied or very satisfied with TUSVM graduates they had hired.
- Employers' suggestions for improving the curriculum related primarily to clinical, communications, and business skills.
- The major strengths that employers identified in our graduates were critical thinking, problem-solving, diagnostic skills, and ethics.
- Although employers thought our graduates were strong in theoretical, scientific, diagnostic, and therapeutic knowledge, they cited weaknesses in practical approach and surgical skills.
- Of the employers who indicated they would be hiring veterinarians within the next two years, almost a third intended to hire a TUSVM graduate.

From all groups (alumni, employers, exiting and entering students, and faculty):

- There was a high level of agreement that Tufts provides a friendly and supportive environment.

- The quality of faculty members and personal attention given to students earned the highest ratings.
- Areas for continuing improvement included certain clinical skills, decision-making and client communications regarding cost implications of care, and business management skills.

Action Steps

- To communicate the results of some of the findings, we prepared graphs using quadrants to present levels of importance and satisfaction, for example, of various curricular aspects. This approach allowed the assessment committee to focus on areas that showed high importance but low satisfaction.
- We distributed to all members of the TUSVM a simple brochure summarizing key findings, and we published an article in the alumni magazine.
- We now have a strong, ongoing outcomes assessment process to evaluate graduates and the curriculum. We review the data annually and act on pertinent issues.
- After the first year's survey, we reviewed the questionnaire for clarity, brevity, and function and developed additional instruments to illuminate the survey results in areas the administration deemed appropriate. Each year, we will survey five-year anniversary graduating classes. As we refine the process annually, we will attempt to focus on different areas and evaluate the policy results of earlier years. This strategy creates a loop of continual assessment feedback.

Paper 10

How does borrowing for college affect the lives of alumni? Do graduates feel they receive a return on their investment? Does paying off student loans influence postbaccalaureate activities and choices? In its survey of a group of Class of 1991 graduates, the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium helped its members shed light on this issue of national concern. One important finding for alumni professionals: Debt exerted a greater negative influence on alumni contributions to their alma mater than it did on any other activity.

HEDS Up on Student Debt

Effective Alumni Surveys: A Tool for Addressing Institutional and National Concerns

James F. Trainer
Director, The Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium
Franklin & Marshall College
and
Melinda (Mindy) K. Ellis
Research Associate, HEDS Consortium

The popular press in the 1990s has raised questions about the cost of higher education, elevating concerns among parents that the cost is out of bounds. Stories about the negative effects of student debt on the lives of graduates have added fuel to this fire.

These concerns led to a 1998 General Accounting Office (GAO) study that found that undergraduate and graduate students were borrowing more money than ever and that the proportion of those with more than $20,000 in debt had grown from 9 percent to 19 percent (in constant 1995-96 dollars) between 1992-93 and 1995-96.

Some researchers have suggested that lack of parental planning may be responsible for the rapid growth in loans. On the other hand, others have suggested that financing one's education through loans is not only acceptable but practical. After all, they argue, we take out loans to buy cars and homes; why not to buy a college education? Disregarding the reasons behind the current increased levels of student loans, other researchers have begun to focus their energies on whether the loan burden negatively affects postbaccalaureate life for graduates.

The Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) Consortium, a membership organization of 131 independent colleges and universities based at Franklin & Marshall College, has been conducting alumni surveys since 1994. Although no one survey can be all things to all people, a single instrument designed for many institutions deserves more recognition—especially when it probes issues with national impact. A case in point is the alumni survey we conducted in 1996-97 to clarify—if only on a micro level—some of the impact of undergraduate educational loans.

The HEDS survey is designed to facilitate the exchange of data among members and to help HEDS strengthen institutional planning. We determine specific survey content after reviewing other alumni studies and soliciting input from participating institutions. Each school can also add up to 20 questions of its own.

The third HEDS alumni survey (1996-97) covered five areas of general interest: postbaccalaureate activities, evaluation of undergraduate experiences, financial information, educational background information, and personal demographic information. We revised the survey to study two issues concerning student debt:

- whether alumni of our member institutions feel they are receiving a return on the financial investment they made in pursuing higher education, and
- whether indebtedness has had an impact on their postbaccalaureate activities and choices.

The Survey at a Glance

Sample: The third HEDS alumni survey, this one of the Class of 1991, was conducted in 1996-97 by 22 HEDS member institutions. Some schools did a census of alumni from that class; others conducted a random sample of one-third of their graduates from that year. HEDS played no role in determining how any institution would administer the study.

Method: The mail survey was accompanied by a letter from an institutional representative that discussed the study and the reasons behind it.

Response rate: Participating institutions used a variety of techniques to improve response rates, including some follow-ups to initial mailings. Because the average response rate for the 22 participating institutions was a low 39 percent (range 24-62 percent), HEDS researchers used only the nine schools with response rates of at least 40 percent (range: 42 to 62 percent). Eight of these nine institutions are private, coed, liberal arts colleges; one is a private, master's degree-granting institution. In all, 2,068 individual responses were available for analysis.

Highlights of the Findings

Overall, most alumni (almost 78 percent)—with or without college debt—indicated that the amount they paid to earn their undergraduate degree was "probably" or "definitely" worth the investment. Breaking down those responses by four levels of debt, we found that the higher the debt incurred, the lower the value imparted to the investment:

- Alumni with no debt rated the value of their investment similarly to those who incurred medium-low or medium-high debt levels.
- Those with low levels of debt rated the value of their investment somewhat higher.
- Those with high levels of debt rated the value of the investment significantly lower.

Did the level of loans affect lifestyle after graduation? Here, we analyzed the answers of only alumni who had incurred some debt. We found the responses of those with low debt levels different from the responses of those in all other debt categories on almost every question.

In addition, on questions related to postponing marriage, delaying children, postponing the purchase of health care, and focusing their job search on higher-paying fields, the responses of alumni in the highest debt category were significantly different from the responses of those in the medium-low and medium-high debt categories. In other words, as levels of indebtedness increased, so did the possibility of an adverse effect on certain life choices that demand outlays of money.

Of particular concern to alumni and development efforts was our finding that at every debt level, debt exerted a greater negative influence on alumni contributions to their alma mater than it did on any other activity (such as postponing major purchases, marriage, or having children).

On the positive side, respondents at every debt level indicated that by incurring debt, they were able to obtain a degree at an otherwise unaffordable institution. Based on what we know about the impact of receiving a degree from a selective private institution, these respondents may find that their investment in education was well worthwhile over the long run, although their loans may seem burdensome at the outset.

Action Steps

- To raise response rates, HEDS must either encourage our institutions to employ better techniques to increase response rates or move administration of the survey to the HEDS central office.
- In light of growing concern about credit card and other consumer debt levels that undergraduates are accruing, HEDS has been asked to consider adding a question about consumer debt to our senior survey and alumni surveys.
- HEDS should also make better efforts to tie our freshmen, student, senior, and alumni surveys together so that we can study the impact of student loan burdens as students move into, through, and out of the educational system.
- We at HEDS are extremely concerned about the impact of "unleashing" of educational loans through the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Alumni researchers across the nation need to decide which areas of research best meet current interests. No single survey can be all things to all people, but there is real value in studying a diverse array of major issues using a single instrument. After all, imagine how dismal response rates would be if alumni were expected to fill in five lengthy surveys on the five major topics our survey addressed. On the other hand, focusing on just a single aspect of postbaccalaureate life—such as the impact of educational debt—is invaluable.

Some issues, such as student indebtedness, require more thorough analysis and a far larger sample of students from more diverse backgrounds than HEDS or individual institutions can conduct on their own. Although HEDS and other associations can contribute to the study of national issues on a micro level, the National Center for Education Statistics in Washington, D.C., can best undertake efforts aimed at addressing the debt question on a national level.

Paper 16

Why would engineers need to know how to write well? MIT faculty were surprised to hear the answers to that question from graduates, students, and from within their own ranks. Based on what they heard, they structured more ways for students to learn how to write and speak clearly and effectively.

Engineer Good Feedback

Using Data from a Survey of Alumni to Promote Change in the Academic Program at MIT

Lydia Snover
Senior Planning Officer, Institutional Research
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

By 1996, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had not done a comprehensive alumni survey in at least 20 years. We wanted to know more about how alumni were doing, including how many were pursuing postgraduate work and why. A secondary goal was to track alumni career paths and learn whether their alma mater had helped or hindered alumni progress.

Therefore, in January 1996 we surveyed four groups of alumni (undergraduate classes of 1977, 1982, 1987, and 1992). On the survey, we asked our alumni to rank 27 possible outcomes of attending college, in order of importance. The seven main categories were postgraduate education, employment, evaluation of MIT, personal activities, current status, student loans, and other loans and financial issues. Among the topics addressed within these categories were foreign language ability; writing and speaking skills; math skills; appreciation of the arts, music, and literature; reading speed and comprehension; computer literacy; analytical skills; leadership ability; and self-esteem.

What the survey showed us about the value of writing proved to be especially important.

In 1982, MIT imposed a writing requirement on undergraduates. Students were required to show proficiency in expository writing by their sophomore year and proficiency in technical discourse in their major by the middle of their senior year. Although students may fulfill either part of this requirement by passing certain courses, most have chosen merely to submit a paper for evaluation.

There has been criticism of this requirement almost from the beginning. Because students usually are able to "test out of it" or otherwise circumvent it, MIT didn't appear to be providing opportunities for them to become better writers. Moreover, MIT had done nothing to help students become better public speakers. Out students had come to view acquiring even a minimum proficiency in writing as an afterthought.

For years, too, MIT faculty resisted attempts to broaden the writing requirement, in part because of the feeling that MIT has too many other general requirements (such as eight humanities courses) that adversely affect a student's ability to master the major.

Alumni Survey at a Glance

Sample: The 1996 alumni survey was a census of MIT classes of 1977, 1982, 1987, and 1992 (3,622 total).

Methods: Mail survey followed by a reminder postcard.

Response Rate: 24 percent overall, which is slightly higher than average for MIT surveys.

Highlights of the Findings

The Alumni Survey

Respondents emphasized the need to be able to write clearly and concisely, especially when their jobs involved working for engineers who are notorious for their lack of communication skills. About 85 percent of respondents indicated that the ability to write clearly and effectively was "essential" or "very important" (two parts of a five-part scale) to their current lives. Only three items ranked higher: 94 percent rated analytical and problem-solving skills as "essential" or "very important"; 91 percent rated ability to think critically as "essential" or "very important", and 86 percent said the capacity for lifelong learning was this important. Foreign language ability ranked last among the 27 possible outcomes.

How much had MIT contributed to these outcomes? For analytical and problem-solving skills, 92 percent of alumni respondents indicated "quite a bit" or "very much" (two parts of the five-part scale). Not so with writing: Only 25 percent responded that way. One graduate, in a written response, noted that coworkers were far better prepared for presenting their ideas and working with others. This graduate described the impact of this deficiency: "I was kept available for behind-the-scenes analytically intensive assignments while others had more opportunity to meet with clients and become exposed to higher level issues."

We also analyzed the results for each of the four classes separately, because during that 15-year period, MIT did make a serious commitment to its writing program—establishing another requirement in 1992 and modifying it since then.

The Student Survey

MIT also took part in the 1996 Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) Cycles undergraduate study. As one of 10 participating institutions, MIT could thus see how it compared with its peers. The COFHE survey addressed questions on students' perceived gains in various areas of accomplishment, including writing ability. Results from this survey confirmed what the alumni survey had already reported. MIT ranked last among the 10 schools in two respects: how undergraduates assessed their school's contribution to developing their capacity to write clearly and effectively and students' views of the gains they made in college in writing clearly and effectively.

The Faculty Survey

MIT had participated in the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) faculty survey in 1995-96 to learn more about faculty attitudes toward tenure review, retirement, and educational values. The results of this survey taught us even more. In the section covering goals that faculty had for student development, more than 60 percent of MIT respondents considered preparing students for appropriate employment to be "essential" or "very important." In that context, the faculty began to see writing as having greater importance in preparing students for the workplace.

Faculty could also see from the COFHE study that, even with a strengthened writing requirement, MIT lagged well behind its peers in providing students with opportunities to develop their writing skills. Faculty also saw the evidence in our alumni survey that our alumni felt that mastering quantitative and discipline-specific skills wasn't enough.

Action Steps

As almost anyone could have predicted, the composite results showed the importance to campus and postgraduate work of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The surprise was that all three sets of respondents (alumni, faculty, and students) agreed on the urgent need to enhance the communications program at MIT.

Taken separately, none of the three survey results would have been enough to convince faculty to reexamine the curriculum. Together, however, the findings provided enough evidence that a change was sorely needed. These studies helped MIT come to terms with the differing perceptions that faculty and students had of the role that writing classes should have.

In April 1997, MIT faculty voted unanimously in support of the statement that "the ability to communicate clearly is fundamental; that students should receive instruction and feedback in writing and speaking during each undergraduate year; and that responsibility should be distributed across the entire MIT undergraduate curriculum." This statement marked the beginning of a concerted, three-year effort to design a new, communications-intensive undergraduate curriculum that is designed to integrate writing into the curricula of all departments. MIT has already experienced an increase in opportunities for students to more formally summarize and present the results of their lab courses.

Note: The following six responses are from sessions in which papers 9 and 10 were presented together, as well as paired in various combinations with several other papers.

Response (to papers 9 and 10) from C. Anthony Broh

Registrar
Princeton University

Three terms are often used synonymously but have very different meanings:

- **Outcomes.** For many people at higher levels of an institution, this term connotes key performance indicators (student graduation rates, faculty Ph.D.s, salaries). All of those items are thought of as ratios.
- **Assessment.** In the national context—especially with regard to proposals for a national assessment instrument—assessment generally has taken on the meaning of testing or some sort of cognitive evaluation or understanding, such as whether a particular educational program has produced what it is supposed to produce. This older term has been around for a while in the accreditation field.
- **Evaluation.** This concept describes attempts to come to some sort of conclusion about whether a program was successful. In that sense, an alumni survey is probably an evaluation instrument rather than a measure of outcomes or assessment.

The question of how data translate into policy is near and dear to institutional researchers. If we've got an example of it, we bring it home. That's the point of gathering data, and that's what we like to show. It's a very important point to document not only from the IR side but for the alumni people here as well.

With regard to the HEDS Consortium paper, the people who wrote it are often their own best critics. Jim Trainer stole most of my thunder in his own self-criticism and in talking about the kinds of things he'd like to see next time.

A reminder for those of us not in the research community:

- nominal-level data are used in categories such as male/female, freshman/sophomore to express totals;
- ordinal-level data can be ordered in a series—for example, first/second/third; and
- interval-level data involve scales (e.g., to express temperature).

The need to address the question of indebtedness with interval-level data is particularly important. COFHE data from about 10 years ago implied that there was a sort of threshold effect related to indebtedness: the greater the indebtedness, the weaker the feeling of satisfaction about education and the less the person felt attached to the institution. On the other hand, once students got to a certain level of indebtedness, that debt no longer mattered a whole lot. That's a particularly critical finding for all of us to know. What is that threshold? Has it changed over time? Where is it right now?

Those studies did not inform my own institution, which is particularly unpopular now among peers, because of its more generous scholarships. As Princeton has been formulating its new financial aid policy, however, the question of whether graduates are happy with their institution—based on the amount of debt they had when they left—certainly was a major, major consideration. That particular threshold of indebtedness would not be captured in a variable that started with low, medium, or high.

Because the HEDS authors were talking about the effects of indebtedness—a critical point of the paper—I'd like to see the relative significance of indebtedness as it relates to these other issues. Is it indeed the same for delayed marriage or buying a home or starting a family or making major purchases or continuing education or deciding between professional school or graduate school? These key questions that have been around are indeed longitudinal kinds of questions. The data would speak to that.

We find as a kind of conclusion—and one that I don't disagree with—that indebtedness is important, significant, for all of these decisions. It raises the question for me, however, of how important. That's a key research question, especially for this group.

Response (to papers 9 and 10) from Susan Dolbert

Executive Director, Alumni Association
Arizona State University

In the first session of this conference, Kent Rollins from the University of Arizona commented that alumni decisions and programming often were based on what he called the "WAG theory"—wise-ass guesses. I do think that's true.

There's another factor involved: "WAAOs"—wise-ass alumni officers who come to us with their own agendas. What I've found in my couple of years in alumni relations is that unless the institution has data and a structure in place to get information, WAAOs will start to drive the process toward their own agendas in alumni associations. Alumni directors are finding that it's important to get ahead of that game and get some structure in place.

It's wonderful to hear from institutional researchers who have really been responsive to institutional needs. That's what many alumni directors are trying to do—to make the point that alumni research is very important to the institution and to give it a higher priority. When I was director of admissions at Arizona State University, IR responded to me much more quickly and with much more enthusiasm when I was looking at enrollment issues and what kind of impact they might have.

Why should the institution be interested in alumni? Dawn Terkla and Kelli Armstrong made a statement in their paper that reflects what I would call the alumni advantage: Alumni are the only constituency that can determine if curricular or program changes have the ability to weather the test of time. That fact is really valuable for us to remind our institutions and our researchers about: Alumni are a very special constituency that can provide longitudinal information that is difficult to get anyplace else.

A more practical reason is that we're being told to do this through accreditation processes and by the federal government (both mentioned in these two papers), as well as through the governing structure. Yes, we're trying to get valuable information for the institution, but we're also trying to improve the relationship of our alumni to the institution.

Alumni issues and student issues are closely aligned. Looking at how we can make that student experience better is as important to people in alumni relations as is trying to recapture alumni we've turned off while they were students. The better alumni feel about the institution, the better will be their lifetime participation. We look at response rates; if alumni feel better about the institution or really want to help, they're going to respond more readily. In establishing that network, however, it's also important that alumni talk—to the next-door neighbor or the people at work—about their experiences in college. Alumni do get reminded quite often about participating in terms of time and money. We need research instruments that can give us that kind of information.

We cannot separate admissions, financial assistance, and registration from alumni issues because those issues really help form the basis for the alumni relationship. All of us in alumni relations would want to encourage that kind of family situation.

It's important for alumni staffs to communicate to our alumni the information we receive through this research. Sometimes that feedback is difficult because it's not always the most positive information, but unless our alumni know what we're doing, what the institution is today, and what kinds of steps we're trying to take to make it a better place, it's more difficult for us to try to pull them back.

We also want to focus on things we have changed. Arizona State University surveyed its students years ago and found some problems in academic advising. No surprise: We're the fifth largest school in the country. We made a campus commitment to improve advising. This year, in our senior survey, we found an unbelievably dramatic increase in student satisfaction with advising. In our magazine, we plan to talk about that improvement.

Challenges? There are so many in research. We've had papers in this session from both ends of a continuum—from a very specific school (Tufts veterinary school) within one institution to 131 institutions in the HEDS Consortium addressing national issues. The challenges we have in alumni relations relate to questions such as, How do we focus? Prioritize? Maximize the information we're trying to collect without making the collection too burdensome?

In some ways, our alumni feel that the institution communicates with them too much—fund raisers call too often, or alumni associations try to market their credit cards and other affinity products. (Those items have become a very important part of our budgets.) How do we use survey or research information so that it's appealing to alumni and so that they understand the importance of it and respond to it? We're already inundating them with other types of information. What kinds of information can we get that will have multiple uses? These two papers have reflected many of those issues.

The HEDS paper discusses some implications of financial aid issues for alumni relations—regarding long-term relationships for alumni, their giving back, and identifying those people and trying to support them. If alumni are graduating with $100,000 debts, when will we ever expect to get those alumni engaged back with the institution? When they pay off those students loans, are they going to feel like giving that payment to the institution? I don't think so.

Response (to papers 9 and 16) from Diane Cuneo

Director, Institutional Research
Smith College

It's always amazing to me to see data from a place like MIT, where the graduates will give the institution high marks on improving quantitative skills, but improving writing skills is on the lower end. Smith College's situation is exactly the opposite. Our alumnae give us the highest marks for improving their writing skills and the lowest for improving their quantitative skills.

In 1982, Smith conducted an alumnae biography project—a very large-scale, cutting-edge alumni research project. It fed biographical information to the career planning office, the alumnae association, and other groups on campus. For example, the alumnae association used the information gathered to determine who might be a good committee chair; the career planning office used the information to find potential career advisors and mentors. What was conspicuously absent was what we now call outcomes assessment or evaluation—information on how well the college had served its students, feedback on programs and services. At Smith and in the field in general, research on graduates has progressed tremendously. It now is standard fare. Institutions are using evaluations from alums in their outcomes assessment and evaluation efforts.

These two papers are excellent examples of how alums are a component of assessment. If it's not true at your institution now, it will be soon. The research doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't have to have a lot of flow charts and boxes and arrows, though there's certainly a place for that. Very simple questions and very simple answers sometimes can go a long way.

Both papers use what could be called multiple perspectives, or triangulation, or converging evidence. Several groups were surveyed in each study. There's a lot of overlap in this kind of feedback, and that's what you're looking for, as well as some differences. You can't rely on one source—say, your students. You've got to get multiple perspectives.

The MIT study provides a historical perspective—surveying multiple classes, which is very valuable. An institution learns a lot by looking at itself over time. When you implement a policy or curricular change, your work is not done. You have to assess the effect of that change over time. The MIT study looked at two classes that graduated before the writing requirement was instituted and two after. The results did show an effect: a slight increase in the rating of MIT over time.

That brings us to another point, made explicit in the Tufts paper—that outcomes assessment is not a one-time thing. It is a continuous thing. It has to be woven into the fabric of the institution.

Another important point is the use of comparative data. MIT looked at its peers, at how their graduates rated their institutions on institutional contributions to writing and other outcomes. The MIT study used several national instruments, whereas the Tufts study was based on surveys designed internally by committee. It's nice to do both. At Smith, the common practice is to make use of a national instrument whenever possible.

Then it's very easy to get your comparative data, and you can also add a set of localized questions that are very specific to your institution.

We need to be reminded that self-assessments are only one component of outcomes assessment.

Input from employers, faculty, alumni, and students are subjective opinions, such as, "I think my writing improved." What's lacking in the field are more examples of objective measures of outcomes assessment.

Alumni research can inform and help improve the institution. If we say to alumni that we want feedback from them to improve the curriculum and serve our students better, we're going to get a good response rate. If we do research to improve services or create better programs for alums, again, very noble, no problem. I do have a problem with linking IR to alumni research designed primarily to inform fund raising. At Smith, we in institutional research make it a point to say that our alumni research has nothing to do with fund raising. On the other hand, throughout this conference, I've seen some excellent research that looks specifically at fund raising, and I think that research needs to be done.

Response (to paper 10) from David Fagerlie

Executive Director of Alumni
University of Washington

What Jim Trainer and Mindy Ellis call national research, I will call centralized research for the common good. Drawing on their review of student debt, their paper sought to illustrate the value of such research. If the strategy was to choose a subject to hook my attention, they were successful. However, I think the example they used missed the point of this conference. Their point was that together we can all learn more about subjects that affect us all.

The authors acknowledge that the institutions in their HEDS Consortium are not unified in the reasons for their participation in the survey, which I expect requires parting with a fair number of greenbacks. Some universities and colleges were more interested in the section of the survey instrument that could be customized. Others were more motivated, perhaps, by what they could learn from the overall information. Nevertheless, the research had relevance to numerous sets of interests.

For me, though, this paper also raises difficult questions. When I think about how difficult it is to get parts of my university to move in a common direction, I wonder about the challenge of getting multiple colleges and universities to agree on a single set of research questions. Is the value of collaborating outweighed by the value of flexibility?

The authors suggested—correctly, I believe—that alumni are going to follow through on only so many surveys. How many surveys from my university is an alumnus/a willing to answer? We all understand how precious time has become. We want speed and efficiency in our lives. Do the benefits of centralized research add sufficient value to our exchanges with alumni, given how quickly the patience of most people is exhausted?

My experience in marketing is, I assure you, much more substantial than my experience in higher education. In today's marketplace, failure to group one's constituencies into segments with common characteristics and interests is a prescription for failure. Recognizing that opportunities to connect with alumni are finite in supply, how useful is centralized research in comparison with more finely segmented research conducted at the institutional level? I would argue that research of this kind should be considered in determining an institution's research mix. How could centralized research be used to further our efforts at improving media and public relations, trustee relations, parent relations, legislative affairs, or planning for technology? How do small colleges with more limited research budgets assure that their desires are not overwhelmed by the desires of larger universities that enjoy the benefits of economies of scale?

The authors indicate that participation rates were not as good as they had hoped. In what ways can colleges and universities stimulate higher participation by students and alumni in this kind of research?

Response (to paper 10) by Joseph Pettit

Vice President for Planning
Georgetown University

Pettit contributed to the discussion by posing a few questions:

Joseph Pettit: Maybe the question of high debt is unique to independent institutions. What can these institutions realistically do about the debt that at least some of their students incur during college? Have any insights occurred to you?

James F. Trainer: Certainly at the moment, high debt levels are related more to the private sector, but I suspect over time it's going to become an issue in the public sector as well. In the public sector, as state support has gone down, tuition prices have risen. With the federal government's unleashing of loans, loans are less tied to need than at any other time. Anyone can go into debt, whether he or she needs to or not. Institutions need to start thinking about what the impact is going to be when the number of individuals with high debt grows over time and the debt levels increase over time. Institutions need to look at how that's going to affect students while they're enrolled and after they graduate—they have student loans essentially equivalent to a mortgage, and then they want to buy homes and finance cars as well. It's something that folks in alumni affairs and fund raising are really going to have to think about.

Pettit: What can CASE, AIR, COFHE, and an organization like your own (HEDS) do to encourage more alumni research?

Melinda (Mindy) K. Ellis: The main objectives for COFHE's and HEDS' instruments are data-sharing among member institutions, not conducting research on any single area.

Trainer: The assessment movement and all the regional accrediting agencies want not only your institutional study; they also want you to be able to put the information in the context of your regional, state, or national peers. So there is a value in institutions collaborating.

Pettit: It might help our institutions to understand that they need to segment whom they are

going to survey so they don't just blanket groups of alumni and wear out their patience. We need to help institutions think through the idea of more focused, random-sample surveys so they can afford the efforts needed to secure high response rates. What can HEDS, COFHE, CASE, and AIR do, in addition to what they are doing, to find out how institutions are actually using what they're already learning from alumni research?

Ellis: We do hear from the HEDS members who do extra work beyond what we provide them via comparative data. We encourage them to share their findings through presentations at conferences or by writing papers. We also need to encourage institutions to do more with the data.

Q&A

(from several sessions)

This past half-hour has been a discussion on techniques and methodology, and refinements of methodology. People in IR find those things endlessly fascinating. The alumni people here could care less. We want results we can work with. What are we to do if we are the users of all this? I did my doctoral dissertation, and it was a quantitative one, so I have some familiarity with all of this. When I've got something I want to do, and I need answers, I need to go to someone and say, "Can you answer this question for me?" Now all of you are indicating that after you've done that, you have all kinds of second guesses. I don't want to hear that! Should I get a second opinion? As I try to embark on research, I'm going to spend a lot of my organization's money, and I find out that the people who are putting all of this together for me aren't really so sure that they've captured it anyway. That makes me really uneasy.

Dawn Geronimo Terkla: If you go to a reputable institutional researcher instead of a quack, the discussion should occur before the research is done—that there are various ways to approach your question and various ways to collect the data, and what the drawbacks and benefits of each of those ways are. There are issues about sample size and whether the results you are going to get are representative of the population. Social science is not an exact science.

C. Anthony Broh: The other half of the problem is when the institutional researcher goes to the people on the development side and says, "What is the question you want to have answered by our survey?" In my opinion, the difficulty is in articulating the problem and being able to define it in a way that then allows quantitative data to be brought to bear on it. The frustration of the two groups trying to work together is felt in both ways. Also, what is the policy implication of this research? Is it really going to make a policy difference if the answer comes out yes or no? Then you will find good institutional researchers to help you. But saying, after the fact, "I need some data to support the policy that the vice president and I have decided on. Give me some data and make it definitive!"—it's very difficult for anybody to be in that kind of role. That's the position institutional researchers often find themselves in.

Have you ever found significant differences between what people say and what they do? Seriously! For example, people say they're upset about this level of debt, but you look at the choices they make, and they're making exactly the same kinds of choices. There seem to be no behavioral consequences. What do researchers do when they find this sort of dissonance?

Melinda (Mindy) K. Ellis: The University of Pennsylvania had used some earlier HEDS data to look at the student indebtedness issue. In the battery of nine questions, there are questions that relate to impacts on postbaccalaureate decisions: Did you have to wait to get married because of your loans? or wait to have children? Those people in our informational section of the survey were just as likely to be married or to have children. So it is showing differences between response and behavior.

Comments from alumni relations practitioners:

William J. Hecht

Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer, Alumni Association
MIT

There are three sets of issues afoot here. The first issue concerns the pressures on those of us in the alumni business for answers to questions that you wish provosts 30 years ago had funded surveys about.

Second, the databases that you'd love to marry often don't contain the information quality you want. Alumni databases, even sophisticated ones, don't contain a lot of data because 10, 15, 20 years ago, people in the university weren't interested in the long-term impact of some of these issues. Debt didn't look like a problem. Financing a higher education didn't look like a problem—there used to be something called the federal government that paid for a lot of these things. The underpinning data that you would love to have doesn't exist.

Third, very important questions are going begging for the want of even approximately OK-quality answers, and I think this is one of the most important issues. What we'll have to do is dig in and muck around together because there are questions we can ask. This mucking around is tough for those of us in the educational establishment to see. The customer is different. He or she is asking for very different kinds of data than what we used to take on faith. We're on the verge of being tossed out of the temple if we can't come up with a much better set of answers, even if we'll all be uncomfortable with the quality of those answers at the beginning. All we can do is put the questions out there and work to get more robust sets of answers.

I encourage all of you who haven't collaborated with your IR people to figuratively get to know them and love them, and they will get to know you and love you. Eventually, you will even learn to talk to one of them.

John Wissler
Executive Director, Alumni Association
Boston College

There is a purely alumni, non-fund-raising component that works very well. Having an alumni director who understands that alumni need to be cared for in a certain way and not have their sensibilities offended goes a long way toward having a smooth fund-raising operation. The MIT model has something of an advantage. Just before I came into this work (30 years ago), the development word came into universities and colleges; they hired 'development people' and swept away virtually every alumni fund that existed in alumni relations and said, 'This isn't the way to do it.' When they took away the budget, we gave up something: the ability to have a say in how our alumni were treated. This tension is not going to go away. There is absolutely no question about it. This tension is going to stay.

Karen Spahn
Executive Director
University of Phoenix

On our alumni survey we ask, Would you be willing to share your success stories? Would you be willing to be an advocate for the University of Phoenix? We don't ask our alumni for money, but ask would you be willing to be an advocate for the University? We work very closely with alumni relations to identify these alumni; we make the connections through our alumni survey and feed them to our alumni department, so they know who these alumni are. This AIR/CASE conference is one of the best exercises I've ever been a part of. We have to value each other's diversity and the purpose and role and mission we all serve.

Ideas from Participants

How to ask about income: Providing ranges rather than asking respondents to write in an amount has increased responses quite a bit, one institution has found. That approach helps to avoid offending alumni about a sensitive area.

Target: Consider doing smaller, much more targeted surveys to avoid wearing out the welcome mat with alumni.

Paper 11

Chancellors and coordinating agencies are on the firing line in answering the question, "What does higher education give back to the state for the money it spends?" In response to this demand for increased accountability, governing boards of multicampus systems have been monitoring key performance indicators and benchmarks. Among these indicators: How satisfied are soon-to-be-alumni with their education? Did they develop the skills they need? To keep tabs on these questions, West Virginia and Virginia use surveys and data-linking. The results enable higher education leaders to demonstrate their strong commitment to alumni—and to answer those tough questions from legislators and the public.

Two States Benchmark Accountability

Conducting Alumni Research in and for State Higher Education Systems

Marsha V. Krotseng
Director, Research and Information Systems
State College and University Systems of West Virginia
and
Darrell E. Glenn
Assistant Director, Research and Information Systems
State College and University Systems of West Virginia

Over the past decade, higher education's numerous constituents—including students, parents, and the general public—have demanded increased accountability of individual institutions as well as

> **"I found that the alumni surveys and research actually can foster good public relations. I was amazed at the amount of attention our statewide data-linking employment and earnings study gained in the media. Maybe it was a slow news day, but it actually got attention in print and also from West Virginia public radio."**
>
> —Marsha V. Krotseng

multicampus systems. Are graduating students satisfied with the quality of teaching and advising they received? Do they feel well-prepared for employment or further education? Are they getting good jobs? How are they faring in the workplace?

State legislatures, mindful of their obligation to spend public resources wisely, are asking those questions, too. The issue is especially obvious when a constituent's son or daughter is not admitted to the publicly supported medical school or can't find a job in the state.

Facing inquiries before the legislature's finance or education committee, chancellors and presidents realize they must have ready answers; funding often is at stake. For leaders of multicampus systems, the challenge in answering such questions is obtaining and presenting data that are accurate, comparable, and consistent across the system.

Several exciting approaches in West Virginia and Virginia convert this challenge into opportunity. They are among the many states that use variations of the familiar methodology of surveying alumni and soon-to-be-alumni.

West Virginia's Experience

In 1993, West Virginia legislators enacted a far-reaching higher education law that was based on the results of statewide town meetings. The law mandated that students should be "prepared to complete in a global economy," which meant more advanced education and "a level of skill that far surpasses former requirements." With the legislature calling for improving academic preparation in higher education, the two governing boards for the state's 15 public postsecondary institutions (the State College and University Systems of West Virginia) adopted plans to survey soon-to-be alumni. These 15 institutions include a land-grant research university, a master's level university, baccalaureate institutions, and community colleges. One central staff serves both systems.

Highlights of the West Virginia Findings

- Overall, both cohorts responded favorably with regard to their education. About 88 percent of respondents

The West Virginia Survey at a Glance

Sample: The first two surveys were of graduating students in 1995-96 and 1996-97 (approximately 14,000 students). Some institutions surveyed every student; others took a sampling.

Method: Statewide committees decided on 12 questions to be added to graduating student surveys already in existence. The questions addressed student satisfaction with aspects of their academic competence such as basic knowledge in general education, effective writing ability, math skills, critical thinking ability, public speaking, computer literacy, and global perspectives. The surveys were implemented by every campus across the state as graduation approached, with the proviso that the exact same questions be asked across all campuses. This approach ensured consistency and comparability of data, permitting responses to be shared with other campuses statewide and allowing the data to be summarized in a way that was meaningful for each institution. Surveys were mailed or picked up by students.

Response rate: 36 percent (1995-96) and 45 percent (1996-97). The 5,672 responses were entered into a database at each campus and then sent electronically to the systems' Central Office. There, the separate files were merged (although campus codes were retained) and analyzed. The Central Office sent summaries and campus-level data back to the campuses for their use and presented them to the governing boards.

"agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they were able to develop critical thinking skills.

- Respondents also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their acquisition of basic knowledge in general education, their development of writing skills, and quality of teaching.
- Respondents rated academic support services less favorably—in part, perhaps, because of the uncertainty they expressed regarding the meaning of this question.

The Virginia Survey at a Glance

Sample: The survey was of graduating students in 1994. As in West Virginia, some institutions surveyed every graduate in the group, and others surveyed a sample.

Method: State agencies provided each Virginia institution with nine questions. Each Virginia institution administered the questions during the summer of 1997 and performed its own analysis of responses.

Response Rate: Varied for each institution; statewide data not available.

Virginia's Experience

In 1997, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (the coordinating agency) and the Virginia Department of Planning and Budget asked four-year postsecondary institutions to conduct a survey of graduates three years out. The two agencies provided nine common questions to evaluate the extent to which alumni had benefited from their undergraduate education. The questions touched on student loan debt, whether the undergraduate major helped performance in the workplace, and current employment. Individual institutions had the option of adding questions specific to their campuses.

Data-Linking Provides Solid Answers

Another powerful way to conduct alumni research is to link data from state agencies with information from an institution's own surveys. The results can answer questions from legislators about whether graduates are getting jobs and if they get jobs in-state. Higher education researchers in many cities have discovered ways to link state employment files with educational records. Such record sharing benefits everyone and helps hold higher education accountable. The cost is low, the validity is high, and the data are reliable.

In Florida, for example, one comprehensive data-sharing effort in 1995 cost just 7 cents per student, compared to the $50 per respondent that some surveys cost. Florida also matches student graduation data with records from military enlistment, postal service careers, federal career employees, and corrections and welfare files.

In 1996, West Virginia's State College and University Systems contracted with the state's Bureau of Employment Programs to match unemployment insurance wage files with records of the public systems' alumni. (In such a study, researchers must assure the security and confidentiality of the data. As part of the agreement between the public institutions and the employment bureau, anyone disclosing this confidential information is subject to possible criminal and civil penalties.) The first year's effort used records of 34,000 public system alumni who had graduated between 1991 and 1994. By linking higher education graduation and student enrollment records for subsequent semesters, we could determine whether alumni were pursuing further education at the state's public institutions.

The initial setup and programming required a six-month lead time and had a one-time programming charge (but a minimal per-record expense). Now, within a month, the employment bureau can provide an electronic file with the desired matching data for each alumni record—at a very reasonable cost.

Highlights of the Data-Linking Findings

We began with a basic question: How many alumni were employed in West Virginia for at least one quarter of 1995? In the end, we were able to shed light on many more employment and educational activities, especially after analyzing annual earnings and changes in annual earnings. Among other things, we could look at:

- the number and percentage of alumni employed in the state for all four quarters;
- annual earnings correlated with degree and major field (such as liberal arts, education, trade/technical, math/science); and
- annual earnings in comparison with degree level and age at time of graduation.

It was enlightening and exciting to discover that more than 75 percent of alumni from 1993-94 and 1994-95 were either working or pursuing further education in West Virginia in the calendar year following their graduation.

There are limitations to such efforts. For instance, this study did not track self-employed workers, so we may be underestimating the number of alumni working in the state. Moreover, out-of-state employment, or the pursuit of education at private institutions, is not readily tracked in this way.

Action Steps

Virginia: As of the summer of 1998, the survey will be administered in even-numbered years to alumni two years out.

West Virginia

- When we released the results of our data-linking research to the higher education governing boards, the state's newspapers and radio stations found the results intriguing. West Virginia public radio aired a statewide segment describing the study. The data had generated clear interest beyond the higher education community.
- In 1997, the data-linking study was included in the ***Higher Education Report Card,*** the state-mandated annual report, which is distributed to legislators and made available to the public. This information is intended to become a standard part of this accountability document.
- The chancellors of the State College and University Systems are now well-positioned to respond to legislative inquiries about alumni satisfaction and employment outcomes. With solid data to answer such questions, the system leaders can demonstrate their strong commitment to alumni as well as their accountability to legislators and the public. Thus, this research helps them to become more effective advocates and interpreters for their institutions.

Paper 12

When the beach is eight miles away but students have no way to get there, they're bound to grumble—even after they graduate. Preparing for its reaccreditation, Virginia Wesleyan College began a series of surveys to learn more about what its former students liked and disliked. Had they been satisfied with the college's services? Had their college experiences brought them personal growth and prepared them for work and graduate school? What were they unhappy about as students? After "getting a grip" on student satisfaction issues, the college implemented small changes (a van that stops at the beach) as well as some big ones (adding a student recreational facility to the capital campaign).

Surf's Up on Satisfaction

Using Alumni Follow-up to Assess Institutional Quality

Larry H. Kelley
Director of Institutional Effectiveness
The University of West Alabama

Students should leave college with the ability to write clearly and to understand themselves and others and with a strong grasp of the arts, history, social issues, math, and science skills. They should also be able to find a job or—if they choose—to continue their education. A college experience should also promote healthy changes in attitude, behavior, value systems, good citizenship, and personal traits such as discipline and self-control.

Do Virginia Wesleyan College (VWC) graduates leave college with these attributes? To find out and to keep pace with the increasing demand for accountability, the college began with surveys and followed up with other measures.

(Note: Kelley began his study while director of institutional research and assessment at Virginia Wesleyan College and later undertook it as a consultant. He is now director of institutional effectiveness and planning at Northeast Louisiana University.)

VWC is a private, liberal arts college located in Norfolk, Virginia, that is tuition-driven and has 1,500 students, about 60 percent of whom are transfer students. VWC's commuter population has been growing over recent years—as has its overall enrollment—and the predominately white college is gradually attracting more minority students.

In 1992, VWC's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment began its first follow-up survey of three classes of graduates. Six months later, it surveyed another three classes. The next year, the survey became an annual instrument to provide critical feedback on what alumni believe worked or didn't work for them when they were at school.

The Survey at a Glance

Sample: Following the initial two surveys of alumni in 1992, the college conducted surveys in 1993, 1994, and 1995, each targeting the preceding graduating class. The population for the first survey comprised 246 graduates; the next year the survey population was 247; the third year, it was 266. Questions covered demographic factors, reasons for enrollment, education satisfaction, and subsequent employment.

Method: The survey was mailed in October or November after the June graduation. A second questionnaire went out to nonrespondents approximately one month later. A third mailing (in 1995 only) went to nonrespondents four weeks after the second mailing.

Response rates: 1993 graduates: 51 percent; 1994 graduates: 60 percent; 1995 graduates: 63 percent.

Highlights of the Findings

Although most students were satisfied overall, about a third had been unhappy about some component of campus life. Since the surveys, VWC has instituted follow-up assessments that probe not only student satisfaction but specific facets of campus life. It also has taken numerous steps, small and large, to remedy identified problems.

Why students enrolled. Most respondents indicated that they chose VWC because of its location and size. Thirty three to nearly 58 percent also chose it for friendliness of faculty, academic reputation, programs offered, and financial aid packages. More than half had transferred from other colleges, and three-fourths had commuted at some time during their college experience.

Cognitive and Affective Outcomes. Most respondents reported improvement in 16 of 21 areas of college education. The most substantial growth areas were in:

- understanding the liberal arts,
- thinking critically,
- learning actively,
- understanding other cultures,
- working in a group, and
- writing clearly and effectively.

Respondents indicated low levels of positive growth in some areas, including:

- understanding and applying mathematics in daily life,
- utilizing scientific principles and methods,
- understanding computers, and
- learning citizenship.

Overall reactions to VWC. An overwhelming number of respondents—93 percent of 1993 respondents, nearly 92 percent from 1994, and 86 percent from 1995—indicated that, apart from financial benefit, VWC had helped improve their quality of life. Between 75 and 80 percent said they would attend the college again, and between 67 and 74 percent reported that the quality of a VWC education was better than that at other colleges or universities they had attended.

Evaluation of educational and support services. Satisfaction was extremely high with regard to the size of the college, its location, class size, friendliness of faculty and staff, helpfulness and individual attention provided by faculty, and the quality of instruction.

Where students hadn't been happy. Respondents who had resided on campus as students indicated especially high levels of dissatisfaction with some aspects of college life, including:

- the college's ban on resident students living off-campus,
- dining center food,
- the registration process,
- library services,
- class scheduling, and
- recreational facilities.

Continued educational experiences. Twenty-seven percent of 1993 respondents, 20 percent of 1994 respondents, and 13 percent of 1995 respondents went on to further study. Between 75 and 85 percent of those graduates did so to get a professional or advanced degree; 6 to 18 percent obtained or retained a certification or license. More than 90 percent said they had received appropriate preparation for this next educational venture.

Employment after college. Most respondents reported obtaining full-time employment within four months of graduation; the vast majority had held one or two jobs since graduation. Most learned of their first job through referral by a friend, family member, professor, or former employer. Between 11 and 18 percent already had jobs when they graduated. More than half were employed full time at the time of the survey. The majority felt that VWC had prepared them adequately for their current jobs and that their work was moderately or closely related to their major.

Action Steps

Most respondents thought the college had done a good job in preparing them for postcollege life. Thus, the survey results provided important evidence that VWC is doing an effective job in helping students to achieve key educational outcomes. However, the surveys also revealed several areas that the college had to address. Therefore, in addition to repeating the survey every year, faculty and administrators have undertaken other systematic assessments in recent years.

Improved services. The first series of surveys, as well as others over the years, have led to improvement in specific areas of discontent:

- An activities van now takes students to cultural and recreational events, area university libraries, and shopping centers—and, of course, the beach.
- A police bicycle patrol augments campus security.
- Library hours have been extended.
- Computers have been installed in dorms and computer lab hours extended.
- Registration has been streamlined and procedures put in place to guarantee that upperclassmen don't fill up classes required for freshmen.
- The college stopped closing critical offices during lunch and beefed up services for evening students.

> “ **Because we were so dependent on tuition, we wanted to find out what made our students unhappy with the college and why they weren't giving money to the annual fund. We used surveys to find out a lot of different things about their satisfaction with their educational experiences and with college programs and services. We were also looking at employment and graduate school opportunities, but it became apparent that we needed to get a grip on the student satisfaction thing.”**
>
> —Larry H. Kelley

Brainstorming with the president. At the annual president's planning retreat, 20 to 30 representatives from the faculty, staff, administration, and governing board gather for an intense, two-day discussion of student satisfaction and retention. A new student union—an idea that came from the retreat—became a new part of the capital campaign.

Seeking advice from other colleges. In 1992 and 1995, the college asked faculty and student services administrators from four other small Virginia colleges to conduct qualitative studies of the campus culture at Virginia Wesleyan. These consultants studied the catalog and viewbook as well as materials sent to current, former, and prospective students. They also conducted focus groups. On the basis of their recommendations, the student affairs staff:

- established an office to serve commuter students;
- gave students more freedom to hang posters and art work, advertise campus elections, use the dining room for student activities, bring brown-bag lunches and eat with classmates, and start new campus traditions; and
- increased student involvement in planning programs and activities in the new residence hall complex.

Better living on campus. Based on surveys and focus groups with current students, the college made important changes in other programs and services. Students found such changes to be major improvements—even those that sound simple (such as adding a change machine or offering more food selections in the campus grille). VWC also found that it needed to look into why students were dissatisfied with the Freshman Seminar.

Since the 1992 survey of alumni, Virginia Wesleyan has revised the study several times. It now serves other purposes: Academic departments can add questions for their majors, for example. VWC also attaches an employment information form to the front of the survey to:

- collect data on a graduate's job title, employer's name, and type of business;
- seek information about employment opportunities for other VWC grads;
- gather names of supervisors for an employer survey, and;
- offer unemployed graduates assistance from career services.

A survey shouldn't be a one-time activity. The four years of surveys done at VWC demonstrate the usefulness of such studies as part of a systematic effort to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services. From that one survey, the path led to other studies, to planning retreats, to a peer review, to focus groups, and to numerous improvements—including that shuttle to the beach.

Response from Caitlin Anderson

Research Associate, Assessment Forum, American Association for Higher Education (AAHE)

As a research associate with AAHE, I have focused primarily on assessment of individual student learning outcomes. I work with the Assessment Forum, which takes a broader look at the role of a variety of stakeholders—internal and external—within a university in assessing the quality of higher education. We also delve into issues of institutional assessment, including accreditation, to try to achieve a fuller picture of institutional effectiveness.

The Assessment Forum seeks to gauge student learning outcomes in a meaningful way; we believe that those outcomes should be based in the mission of the institution and the major department. Statements on general education, for example, should cover what the college or university expects a student to know and be able to do. These outcomes are much trickier to measure than student satisfaction and student perception of academic and cognitive growth.

For me, these papers raise a variety of questions. I commend the authors for thorough research design and implementation. My remarks reflect the perspective of an outsider.

I applaud the cooperation demonstrated among West Virginia's higher education system and institutions. I've heard horror stories about how many years it takes some institutions to come to agreement on 10 general education statements. It's difficult to get campuses with complex programs, diverse institutional missions, and diverse student bodies to come to agreement on indicators such as satisfaction with teaching.

Virginia and West Virginia have made bold efforts to achieve this consensus. West Virginia decided to implement 12 common questions to address student satisfaction and student preparedness for the work force, and Virginia came up with nine questions to determine the extent to which students benefit from their undergraduate education. The responses could then be compared among institutions and across time.

What did these questions mean, though? Do all the students surveyed use the same definitions? For example, what does critical thinking mean? If we asked the people in this room, we'd come up with 30 different definitions. Have the universities identified what a student should know? From the perspective of the Assessment Forum, the study questions still don't address the most central issue for me: student learning.

Tracking alumni employment in West Virginia through data-linking is another exciting demonstration of cooperation and collaboration among state agencies.

The Virginia Wesleyan paper addresses similar issues at a small, private liberal arts college. A unique contribution of this paper is that the school includes samples of changes and improvements that were based on the results of the alumni surveys and other assessments. I especially liked the story about purchasing a van as a shuttle for students, and putting in change machines. It's the little things that can make a difference. Too often we do assessment to answer stakeholder concerns without taking the next step to implement change: closing the loop based on the results we've found. It is important to ask, What am I going to do with these data?

One of the student satisfaction results I found interesting was that the career office was not mentioned as a place where students learned about their first jobs after college. If I were the career services person, I'd want to do some assessment of the programs I was offering.

I wondered why students answered the way they did. How did they know if they had achieved cognitive growth? What does critical thinking mean to these students? How do they know if they can communicate effectively in public speaking? What's missing in a survey that asks only nine or 12 questions? I do realize the limitations of time, money, and sampling, but I also think that the data would be enriched by the stories and the voices of the students involved in this research.

Response from William J. Evitts

Executive Director, Alumni Relations
State University of New York at Buffalo

These two papers illustrate some of the challenges and difficulties we're going to have in this shotgun marriage between CASE and AIR, which I think is very promising, nevertheless.

From an alumni perspective, I would say these papers raise a lot more questions than they answer. They have wonderfully interesting backgrounds; none of the data are irrelevant, and researchers can do all kinds of fun things with them.

Both papers are about demonstrating outcomes. Different pressures drove them. The schools were finding this stuff out because the law mandated it. I worry a little about research with that background, because the institutions are under the gun. Absent that pressure, would either of these studies have been done?

What is not here is what this research means to alumni per se. In the Virginia Wesleyan study, the idea was to feed back into the student situation—which is exactly as it should be, with more than 80 percent of the budget coming from tuition. Eventually, this feedback will result in happy alumni.

When I was at Johns Hopkins University, the annual fund for undergraduates five years out was having terrible results. We were using a long, boring letter from a classmate that graduates might or might not know; if they did, they might or might not care for that person. It really wasn't doing too well. We asked a group of young alumni to take a look. They told us, "Quit worrying about class years and just call it a young alumni fund for the first five years out." We told young alumni, "Remember all that stuff that annoyed the daylights out of you? We're going to fix it. We're going to buy the van, repair the TV in the student lounge, and scrap that embarrassing lacrosse scoreboard." The first year we tried that, contributions increased 135 percent. (Don't be too impressed: Percentage increase is easy when you're starting small.)

What can institutions do with student satisfaction data? They can feed it into the alumni program; this strategy will give the alumni director a platform from which to understand the situation a lot better.

Surveying at a system level is a curious thing because people don't graduate from a system. The University of Maryland for years had a system-based alumni program, and nobody gave a darn. Students did not graduate from the University of Maryland system; they graduated from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore or the University of Maryland Baltimore County or the

College Park campus [now known as the University of Maryland]. They've come to their senses now, and they have more campus-based associations.

In some states, the independent colleges collectively get a bucket of money from public sources and have almost the same kind of accountability as the public institutions. In New York State, the independents are powerful. In Oklahoma and Florida, the publics are so powerful they overwhelm everything. Drawing the trend line out for two decades, the only difference between a public and a private institution is not how it's funded but how it's governed.

In these Virginia-West Virginia studies, the states are not using the data only at a system level; some of the campuses are breaking out the data. Once research starts to generate data, the genie's out of the bottle. Who knows what institutions can do with it? Alumni relations people who are ingenious can work with this data. Some of those genies might lead to problems if the institutions get into one-up contests between campuses: "Your football team beat us, but we did better on the state survey" kind of thing.

It is important for alumni associations to understand alumni/student satisfaction and dissatisfaction. That helps us build program components. Career services are going to be hugely important in alumni relations. Employment trends are nothing like they used to be, and alumni are going to depend on us.

Such data also help us understand our role as communicators to alumni. Suppose I'm at Virginia Wesleyan, and we've fixed a lot of the things that were hacking off generations of graduates. We're going to make sure that message gets out to alumni. Who knows: Maybe with a little luck and creative work, we can get to the point where the school's budget is only 70 percent tuition-driven because the alumni are starting to support the place more.

There may be some elements that can be put into this collaboration to help alumni offices collect data more directly applicable to their needs. We've got to stop flying by the seat of our pants. I hope one outcome of this conference is that these studies will keep actionable alumni outcomes at least partly in mind.

Q & A

Do you think West Virginia asked the same questions it would have asked if this had been an institutionally driven survey? Or was this research shaped by the fact that they were trying to address legislative concerns?

Marsha V. Krotseng: The survey itself might have been affected somewhat by the legislative concerns. On the other hand, it's difficult to come to agreement among institutions themselves, let alone institutions and the statewide body. Frankly, we probably wouldn't have done it a whole lot differently as far as the construction of an alumni survey goes.

I'm a director of IR for a college. It seems that alumni surveys are inherently flawed for doing learning outcomes studies because for most types of learning, the best we can do would be to ask alumni to rate whether they benefited. I do alumni surveys for departments doing self-studies. Every year, I see where some student says the college "did so much for my writing skills," and the page is full of writing errors. We all know people don't always rate their skills accurately. Have you come across any types of alumni surveys that actually can be used for learning outcomes assessment? I can imagine doing one with writing because if you can get them to write on the survey, then you could—unknown to them—score it for their writing skills.

Caitlin Anderson: I don't do research in this area. We get calls from people asking for it, but I can't find examples. The same goes for alumni surveys; they really do seem to be more about perceptions and satisfaction. There's something in my heart that says there's got to be a way to do it.

Larry H. Kelley: First of all, the alumni survey is not a do-all. It's one of the many things you do, and you use many things for outcomes assessment. If you lived or died on the basis of the alumni survey, you would have very poor outcomes assessment.

In assessing alumni—for example, with respect to core competencies—you have quite a bit of information on what the student experience looks like, as well as opportunities to gather information from students. Gathering it at points during the academic experience is a logical place to begin. On a survey, it's going to be a self-declaration. What you really want to do is assess objectively that competency. At a minimum, you should be able to assess what their writing competency looks like the day they leave the school. On that basis alone you could look at this population with new eyes—you can then go out and look at people across their occupations or at other aspects of lifelong experience.

The same concept applies with regard to asking alumni why they selected their college. You're doing that in retrospect (which may be valuable). You can capture that information—probably at a much lower unit cost—after students matriculate but before they become alumni. There's an opportunity to do much more of an integrated, holistic look at information from the cradle to the grave, and then to integrate it as part of the alumni analysis. If you do that, you can really save some of that valuable space for questions that are most appropriate to ask alumni at that point in their life cycles.

Krotseng: That really is an excellent point. We have a lot of information, even at the state level, although we don't have as much assessment data as an individual institution would have.

Would Buckley Amendment [privacy] concerns get in the way of some of that data?

Krotseng: I think it depends on how the information is shared. As far as using it in aggregate form, I don't think it would. I also know that there have been some concerns about the Buckley Amendment recently.

CHAPTER 7

Paper 13

The best alumni surveys (or surveys of any kind) are timely and get the attention of campus constituents. After 10 years of experience in finding out what its graduates think, George Mason University (GMU) now uses the World Wide Web to do quick, targeted, attractively presented studies. Web-based surveys increasingly are becoming a primary means of collecting data. They've already saved GMU time, money, and energy. This paper provides GMU's guidelines on how to get the most out of the medium.

Super Cyber Surveys

Surveying and Reporting Alumni Data in the Information Age: The Case for Using the Web

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and
Karen M. Gentemann
Director, Institutional Assessment
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Alumni surveys provide a powerful means by which we reflect on the product of our institutions—that is, the experiences of alumni and their insights into our processes. Therefore, surveying alumni has become an integral component of most assessment and institutional research programs. Yet we all know the difficulty of rallying campus constituents around survey findings so that meaningful curricular change results.

Keeping Surveys Focused

The most obvious—and critical—research question to answer is, very simply, "What do I want to know?" Instead, alumni surveys typically attempt to "cover the waterfront" and include questions on topics from employment and civic involvement to rating campus services and expected future giving to the institution. Such surveys often are products of committees; they also may reflect the researcher's uncertainty about when the next opportunity might arise to survey alumni, or they may be attempts to be cost-effective. The following steps can help focus surveys:

- Conduct surveys on a routine schedule. This strategy allows the survey to focus on select topics. A more focused survey often means a shorter survey, which may reduce respondent fatigue and increase the response rate. A survey that has some depth on a limited number of topics also may be more interesting to answer.
- Carefully match the survey population and focus. It's frustrating for someone who graduated more than 10 years ago to comment on campus services such as food (unless it was really that bad). On the other hand, alumni who graduated 15 years ago are an appropriate group to ask about career and education histories since graduation.
- Read recent findings on alumni research, especially from colleagues at peer institutions. Search the Internet, and call or e-mail for successful survey topics and practices. Searching the Internet using the phrases "conducting university alumni surveys" and "university alumni surveys" turned up several listings useful to our Web surveying.

Selecting the Sample

The decision about whom to survey—a sample or the full population—often is driven by limited resources, habit, or tradition. Instead, information needs should drive the decision. In many instances, a sample is preferable. A random and representative sample—in which each and every member of the population has an equal and independent chance of being surveyed—may save time, money, and energy in each step of the process. A full population study (a census) works better, however, to elicit program or department-level information or specific information, such as where alumni are employed.

> **"Basically, with the Web you write questions, and you can put them up in about an hour. It was incredibly fast relative to our more traditional mail methods."**
>
> —Nancy L. Ahson

At George Mason University (GMU), our commitment to population studies rests on several factors, including our need to provide program-level information to faculty, department chairs, deans, and others. Contacting the full population enables us to report campuswide results and provide specific information for schools, departments, and programs.

One variation on a full population study involves placing academic departments or schools on a rotating survey schedule. In this case, one year's survey is sent to graduates from one or more years for a limited number of departments or schools. This approach keeps the overall number in the survey population manageable, yet provides in-depth information for departmental faculty, especially for academic program review or accreditation visits. The biggest drawback, of course, is that the researcher cannot report the results on a campuswide basis.

There are other psychometric reasons for full population studies. To analyze results by certain factors—such as ethnicity or student commuters vs. residents—a full population study is more likely to obtain enough respondents with those characteristics to ensure valid interpretations. When the sample size approaches the number of people in the population to be studied, contacting the entire population is warranted. Population studies, however, do not necessarily eliminate biases associated with nonrepresentative respondents that may occur when response rates are low.

Let's Do a Survey!

"Let's do a survey!" is often the first and gut response to any question today. It seems so easy, but collecting information via surveys is an expensive and time-consuming proposition. Often, it is not until an individual or committee has developed a survey and distributed it that they find they have no means for encouraging responses, entering data, or analyzing the results. Political pressures such as doing a survey with little or no money, doing it too fast, doing too many surveys, or conducting invalid surveys are additional and common challenges to good survey research.

Ten years of conducting surveys and advising others on how to do them allows us to confirm L.A. Suskie's advice in ***Questionnaire Survey Research: What Works, Second Edition***—when she suggests that campus administrators in assessment and institutional research offices change their role from "doer" to "advisor" whenever possible. Additionally, the financial and time burdens associated with typical mail surveys (costly reproduction of the survey, time spent preparing mailing and tracking returns, and entering data by hand or scanning it) further argues for easing the survey burden whenever possible. With modest mail survey response rates of 30 and 40 percent (after mailing two surveys and a postcard as a follow-up reminder) and lengthy survey processes (often four to six months in development and mailing with even more time needed to report the results) we found that providing valid responses to "hot button" issues, often the goal of many surveys, was extremely difficult.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, our survey design and data-handling procedures were user-friendly (for the recipient) and labor-intensive (for those who developed and analyzed them). We generally designed questionnaires in a word-processing program, used graphics and photos to interest respondents, and made the instrument easy to follow and carefully balanced with closed and open-ended items. We paid close attention to the user's frame of reference, survey flow, and ease of completion.

Thoroughly trained undergraduates spent weeks sitting at computer terminals entering data from completed surveys. They typed in responses to open-ended questions, and graduate students coded and analyzed those responses.

By the mid-1990s, we were using scannable survey forms, which often had to be reviewed and cleaned by hand before scanning. Students still had to type in open-ended items. Since then, there have been significant improvements in scanners and in scanning software.

The Web: Our Favorite but Perhaps Not Final Frontier

The World Wide Web promises to revolutionize many aspects of our lives. The art and science of survey research is no exception. Paperless surveying, limited mailings, and elimination of hand-entered or scanned data will change the nature and business of survey research in ways the telephone and other technologies haven't been able to do.

Because of the considerable resources and modest response rates associated with mail surveys, as well as the limitations of focus groups (turnout was poor), GMU's Office of Institutional Assessment chose to explore Web-based surveying by conducting a pilot survey of alumni. This Alumni Technology Survey centered on a population of 200 alumni who had indicated on a traditional mail survey (in open-ended responses) that they wished they would have gained additional computer and technological skills as students. A postcard was mailed to alumni explaining the purpose of the study and giving them a Web address. They were asked to respond on the survey site by a certain date. A second reminder postcard was mailed two weeks later. If alumni responded to the Web site by a certain date, they were entered into a drawing with prizes (donated concert tickets for our Center for the Arts). Each postcard carried a unique number for the respondent to enter on the Web site so that he or she could take the survey only once. In all, 27 percent of our alumni group responded to the survey in just over three weeks. (If this had not been a pilot study, we would have pursued additional attempts to increase this response rate.)

> **"You have to keep a Web survey short. All of us in IR have a tendency to say, 'Oh, just one or two more questions....' Well, you can't do that. The positive side of that, however, is that because Web surveys are relatively easy to do, you could do more surveys that are more focused. We think that's probably a major advantage."**
>
> —Karen M. Gentemann

In the Spring of 1998, our office had several surveys operating on the Internet, including graduating seniors, graduating graduate students, and a survey on football. We are already saving time, money, and energy. Further, in instances where students are given real incentives to respond (for example, graduating seniors will not be mailed their diplomas unless they respond to the survey), response rates are considerably higher when compared to similar paper and pencil surveys.

Advantages of Our Web Surveys

- **Software for Web surveys is readily available and inexpensive.** To develop our survey, we used Homesite 3.0 from Allaire. To manage the data, we used Visual dBase 5.5A, available in the campus bookstore. Our capable graduate students found both programs relatively easy to use.
- **Our total cost for the survey of 200 alumni, including start-up software, was under $500.** The real savings come in staff time and in not having to print and mail the survey.
- **Web-based surveys can be made very attractive, using multiple colors.** Keeping graphics to a minimum reduces downloading time, however. We recommend incorporating pull-down menus for survey responses to decrease the amount of text visible on the Web page.
- **No staff time is needed for data entry or scanning.** When a respondent completes a Web survey and submits it, the data are written directly to a previously constructed database. Researchers do need to pay attention to quality control issues, such as making sure individuals do not reply more than once. Open-ended questions can be downloaded to a

spreadsheet or word processing program and sorted for content or topics. Quantitative data typically can be analyzed in the database or read into an SAS file or other analytical program for more sophisticated analyses.

- **The researcher's time can be better spent.** Instead of hiring temporary employees or organizing the stuffing of envelopes, researchers can spend more time attracting the survey population to the study, analyzing data, and preparing user-friendly reports.
- **Responding to "hot button" issues is possible.** Surveys can be developed quickly, and since data entry is done by respondents, data analysis can occur immediately upon the close date of the survey or even while the survey is in progress. Be careful, however, about reporting data while the survey is in progress to avoid problems with invalid interpretations that may result from incomplete data.
- **Conducting full population studies now costs less.** Without the need to print and mail surveys and hire staff to stuff mailings and enter survey data, full population studies can now be conducted at about the same cost as a random sample study.

Challenges in Offering a Web Survey

Surveying on the Web is very much under development. Although we're not completely dissatisfied with our pilot response rate, we may, in the future, attempt to increase it by using follow-up survey mailings, phone calls, and possibly e-mail reminders. Incentives appear key to encouraging responses, but understanding those incentives that are meaningful for our alumni has always been a difficult question. The following challenges—some of which will disappear in time—are additional ones to Web surveying.

- **Respondents must be computer-literate enough to find the Web site.** By the beginning of the new century, most alumni probably will be.
- **Respondents must have access to a computer.** In our pilot study, only one of our 200 potential respondents called to request a paper copy. (To our knowledge, this person did not send it back.) Of course, there could have been others not able to use the Internet who did not request a print version.
- **Respondents need a fairly current Web browser.** In an on-campus Web survey, we found that faculty using older versions of a Netscape browser could not complete the survey. (We directed them to library computers.)

Questions about computer literacy and access ensure that we will conduct surveys in a dual mode. That is, alumni will be given a choice of responding either to a mail survey or on the Web site. When the proportion of respondents sending back the mailed survey falls far behind the Web response rates, we'll know we can transition fully to a Web-only survey. Further, we look forward to the day when alumni offices have e-mail addresses for alumni and a link to the Web survey can be included in an e-mail message. That future is not far away.

Surveys on the Web appear longer than an equivalent paper and pencil survey. It is possible to put more survey questions on a paper survey page than an equivalent Web page. We've seen a two-page paper survey become eight pages on the Web. Put a "time of completion" estimate on this survey to keep from turning respondents off, and trim questions whenever possible. Further, avoid asking questions that are available through institutional records or databases.

If possible, offer your Web survey in a Secure Socket Layers (SSL) environment. This helps to ensure the safety of sensitive information, such as a Social Security number, by encrypting it as it is sent over the Web. Including this information in your introduction to the survey and placing it as a reminder next to sensitive questions may also be important.

Technical expertise is important. In time, as Web surveying becomes more windows software-driven, instead of program-driven, this will be less of an issue. In the meantime, having technically competent staff is a real plus in developing Web-based surveys. The good news is that increasing numbers of undergraduate and graduate students are developing Web expertise that can be easily employed and very useful to administrative offices.

How We Report our Results

No matter how researchers collect data, reporting the data as understandable information remains one of IR's primary challenges. As our survey process has evolved over time, so have our written and technology-based reporting methods. Clarity and accuracy have always been important, of course, but we have also been paying more attention to the display and presentation of information. To appeal to readers with different learning styles, we try to strike a comfortable, pleasant, and interesting balance in each of our publications:

- *In Focus* ranges from two to six pages and contains a mix of text and graphics in a relatively inexpensive format. Depending on the topic, we send this report to administrators, faculty, and some student groups.
- A general university report contains data from alumni surveys. We then prepare school- and program-level reports comparing their data to those for the entire alumni population. One page especially gets people's attention: the data summary table. This table has four columns. The far right column lists 10 to 20 survey items. The other three columns contain responses by all alumni, the school's alumni, and the department/program's alumni. Department chairs and faculty can tell at a glance, for example, whether their graduates are more or less satisfied than other alumni with their employment, or if they took longer to secure their jobs.
- We mail hard copies of reports to faculty and student publication offices, as well as the library. Faculty and student newspapers often base short articles on our findings.
- And, of course, we post our findings on the Web. Many of our *In Focus* reports appear at *http://apollo.gmu.edu.assess/*. They're short enough to make it easy to share them on the Web, and it doesn't take much time for people at GMU and beyond to read them. In the future, we hope to customize departmental, school, and other topical reports and to spend less time producing cumbersome and expensive paper versions.

The State Raises the Stakes

No matter how much effort we've put into surveys and reports, our office has been somewhat disappointed at how little feedback we get from the campus after we've distributed the alumni data.

Even sending out an evaluation feedback postcard with our reports generated little comment. We are never sure how extensively people use our data (except for the data summary tables, which are used in program reviews and during accreditation visits).

As it turns out, there's a sheep in wolf's clothing: the Virginia Department of Planning and Budget. The department decided that all state institutions would ask a common set of questions on the next alumni survey as part of the statewide performance indicators project. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (the coordinating agency) worked with assessment professionals to develop and refine nine questions for a 1997 alumni survey of all 1993-94 graduates of four-year postsecondary colleges and universities across the state.

Just as our data summary tables attract attention because they make comparing data easy, an advance draft of the state results of this alumni survey grabbed the attention of the entire administrative staff at George Mason. Our alumni, it turns out, were not as satisfied with their experiences as were alumni from other institutions. Although we had been asking and reporting on similar questions in the past, the lack of a comparison data set clearly made our data less meaningful. A later senior survey that showed similar results also helped focus attention on this topic.

We don't yet know what actions will be taken as a result of these statewide comparative data. We do know, however, that deans and other high-level administrators are taking the findings seriously. Having comparable data on alumni satisfaction from other institutions helps us solve the problem of how to put alumni data, or other survey data, on the front burner.

Action Steps

- **Make the survey timely.** Because Web-based surveys can make this easier, we encourage the use of this technology. In a few short years, we think we can just about eliminate paper surveys. Even now, we can merge the two techniques and begin to see immediate savings.
- **Use common-sense guidelines.** Whether the survey is conducted by phone, mail, or the Web, keep the basics in mind. The questions must be worded well. The survey can't be too long. It has to be attractive in format and must have intrinsic interest for your alumni. Two classic books about surveys are *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method*, by D.A. Dillman (John Wiley & Sons, 1978), and *Questionnaire Survey Research: What Works, Second Edition*, by L.A. Suskie (Association for Institutional Research, 1996).
- **Wherever possible, use comparative data when reporting results.** Urge colleagues to include at least some common questions to give campus constituents a context for understanding the results.
- **Share your experiences on Web surveying with colleagues.** Conferences, seminars, and workshops will continue to be important places to exchange ideas. Posting survey results and processes on the Web should also be used to share survey research successes with others. However, the Web is becoming a powerful tool for all of us to access the information we need to improve our processes.

Editor's note: Paper 11 has additional information on the Virginia survey. Paper 13 was paired with paper 5 in one session, so most of the comments from these two respondents are in the chapter on papers 5 and 6. In the Q&A below, Denise C. Gardner is the coauthor of paper 5.

Response from Dan Heinlen

President/CEO
Ohio State University Alumni Association

I have great expectations for the Web approach. It will be better and more effective as time goes on because use of it is generational. If we're trying to survey older alumni, we're less likely to get the kind of response from use of the Internet that we need.

Response from Mary Sapp

Director, Planning and Institutional Research
University of Miami
and AIR President

This paper was very useful as a good history and discussion on methodology. The authors made a very strong point: There are a lot of advantages in administering surveys on the Web. It definitely will be the wave of the future.

The concerns I have are the ones the authors raised in their paper. With regard to security, one possible solution is to have students use PIN numbers. At the University of Miami we will start assigning PIN numbers to our students to make sure they don't vote twice in student elections and that they have secure access to confidential student data. Alumni could also use such PINs.

The big concern is the fact that not all people have access to the Web. This factor could introduce a bias: The responses probably will not be representative of the group as a whole. On the other hand, someone needs to start pioneering. There are situations where this kind of bias will not be harmful—for example, with a student population that is heavily residential with access to computer labs.

Right now, we don't know what percentage of people have access to the Web or what percentage of those will use it. Doing a survey using two media—on the Web and on paper—is one way to find out. Once a high-enough percentage of people responds over the Web, it won't be necessary to continue with the paper version.

Q&A

I'm fascinated by the Web survey possibilities. Seems to me this is a third new methodology. Where are the resources on this?

Nancy L. Ahson: The University of Colorado at Boulder's assessment Web site shares not only the results of surveys, but the experiences they had. Old Dominion University tends to be a paperless office. In talking with colleagues at other places, we've found that there's every intention by people who are really excited about the Web to mail a paper copy as well as to alert people to the availability of the Web site. The folks I've been talking to estimate that in five years or so, almost all surveys will be Web-based. We're hoping it's sooner, because it's certainly expensive to do both. In the next six months, things will just explode.

Is it fair to say right now that in most cases Web surveying is simply used as an ancillary device to strengthen a paper survey, and that they're going to be a lot closer to the mail survey than to the phone survey in their use and application?

Karen M. Gentemann: One of the reasons we like using the Web is that even when we send out a paper survey and it comes back, we enter responses on the Web site database, so we're not fooling with creating data entry screens or even using a scanner. However, we may still continue to use the scanner for a while. I can pay an undergraduate to sit there and scan, and it's pretty quick. With faculty taking a Web survey, we've got some real issues here with technological competence—or because they have old Web browsers.

I'd like to put a little caution out there having to do with Web-based methodologies. As the Web becomes universal, it's going to be easy for everybody and his cousin to create their own homemade survey. Right now there's a barrier. If the alumni office wants to mail a survey, someone has to design, print, and mail it—so they think twice. When the Web becomes universal, we have the danger that we see already, where everyone who has an opinion screams it across the Web. We need to keep the dialogue going so that professionalism remains part of the story here.

Ahson: That's a concern of ours as well. There is this real sense that it's relatively easy for a novice to put a survey up on the Web. I hope that the advent of this technology is an impetus for us to have a conversation about how often are we going to contact alumni and what is really important for us to know, so that we're not overwhelming them. It is an opportunity, but it's also an opportunity to really lose them if we bother them too often about issues that may or may not be close to their hearts.

Gentemann: Look at the model of telephone surveys. There isn't a single one of us who doesn't hate the phone call that comes about 7 p.m. every night. We are so inundated. It's harder and harder to get people to respond to phone surveys. That model makes us very cautious and nervous. On the other hand, just putting a Web-based survey out there doesn't mean squat because if people don't have a modem, you won't get anything anyway.

Would you do any survey Web-only?

Denise C. Gardner: Not right now, even on campus. At N.C. State, we just did our first on-campus survey, of second-semester sophomores. I notified them first by e-mail, then followed up with a paper copy. I included as an incentive a drawing for $200. We had a very good response—36 percent responded on the Web within the first two weeks, and an additional 10 percent responded by mail. That beats anything we've done so far with an on-campus population. We will continue to follow up with paper, at least for a while.

CHAPTER 8

Paper 14

There isn't much information on the career paths of doctoral graduates five to 10 years after graduation. This study of two major research institutions—one in Illinois and one in North Carolina—helps to fill that gap. It reveals that most Ph.D. alumni have found jobs in a variety of professions, not just in teaching. Many are satisfied working in the private sector. Although the job market does affect their career choices, quite a few had planned for careers outside academe even while they were in graduate school.

The Plight of Ph.D.s

Doctoral Graduates in Today's Employment Marketplace: Are They Really Driving Taxi Cabs?

Nancy Garrett
Resource and Policy Analyst
Office for Planning and Budgeting
University of Illinois
and
Sandra H. Hoeflich
Assistant Dean for Fellowships and Public Information
The Graduate School, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

What's the true story? Are universities using doctoral students as highly skilled, cheap labor to teach and do research? Are graduate students being misled into thinking the academic job market will hold unlimited opportunity, only to find themselves becoming highly educated taxi drivers? Or are they satisfied that they have been well-prepared for the rigors of the professional marketplace?

The UNC Survey at a Glance

Purposes:

- to gain information from Ph.D. alumni about how well they believed their academic programs had prepared them for their professional careers and to gain empirical evidence about the extent to which that preparation resulted in their professional success;
- to better understand patterns of where alumni dispersed, geographically and professionally, and
- to identify alumni who might help advance graduate education politically and financially.

Sample: All UNC Ph.D. graduates from 1986 through 1992 (2,035 in total) in 55 graduate programs.

Method: Mail survey conducted in March 1997.

Response rate: 31 percent overall.

The Illinois Survey at a Glance

Purpose: Since 1973, the University of Illinois has conducted an annual survey of graduates at all degree levels. Since 1991, the university has been part of a follow-up study of baccalaureate alumni at Illinois public institutions coordinated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE). Unlike the UNC survey, the annual Illinois survey—which focuses on undergraduate alumni—did not ask questions about whether Ph.D. graduates had tenure-track jobs or how specific parts of their doctoral programs prepared them for their careers. The Illinois survey had the following aims:

- to provide data on student outcomes that colleges and departments can use in program reviews at the Chicago and Urbana campuses;
- to enable Illinois to continually assess its performance and compare results across time and cohorts and to give a statewide context to the university's results;
- to provide information for career advisers; and
- to serve as a rich resource for conducting research into relationships between a student's education at Illinois and the student's postgraduate activities.

Sample: All Illinois graduates in a given class residing in the United States (8 to 13 percent of Ph.D. graduates live abroad) for a total of 2,306.

Method: Mail surveys.

Response rates: For doctoral graduates, between 50 and 54 percent

In seeking answers to those questions, we analyzed feedback from doctoral graduates of two Research I institutions: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) and the University of Illinois. Because the job market for Ph.D.s tends to be national, it is useful to look at two regions of the country.

The number of doctoral degrees awarded in the United States reached an all-time high of 41,942 in 1995, after steadily increasing since 1986. Much has been written about the fact that many Ph.D. graduates these days are teaching part-time or are adjuncts.

Most follow-up studies of Ph.D. graduates are done right after they finish their dissertations or a few years after. Our data help to fill the need for information on the plight of Ph.D.s beyond those first few years. Our overall goal was to illustrate how information from alumni regarding their satisfaction with their experiences and their eventual careers can help to improve the relevancy and usefulness of academic programs.

Each of these two surveys was designed for a different purpose, so we focus mainly on questions addressed by both.

To compare data with the UNC survey, our analysis of the two Illinois surveys focused on two classes five and 10 years after graduation: the 1996 survey of the Class of 1991 and the 1994 survey of the class of 1984. In addition, we used a one-year-out survey (the 1995 survey of the class of 1994).

Highlights of the Findings

Unemployment and Underemployment. Among Illinois doctoral graduates, more than 90 percent were employed full-time. Few were "unemployed and seeking a job"—about 3.4 percent one year after graduation, about 2 percent five years after graduation, and 3 percent 10 years after graduation. We can conclude that under a traditional definition, unemployment is very low for these Illinois doctoral graduates. Underemployment, however, appears to be fairly high: among those a year out, a third of the respondents were underemployed; among those 10 years out, one in five were underemployed. (The North Carolina survey did not include questions on employment status and underemployment.)

Career Paths. Illinois doctoral graduates 10 years out were more likely to work in business (28 percent did) than those 1 year out (16 percent) and less likely to work in higher education (46 percent) than those 1 year out (58 percent). Over time, graduates may be finding alternative careers because of shortages of tenure-track posts in higher education.

For UNC doctoral graduates, the distribution of types of employers is remarkably similar. Almost 54 percent of UNC Ph.D. alumni work in higher education. About 20 percent work in proprietary enterprise (roughly similar to the "business" category in the Illinois survey.) Almost 82 percent of respondents 5 and 10 years after graduation indicated that they are engaged in the professional career for which they had planned. The job market does seem to affect career choices for these doctoral graduates, but many of them had envisioned careers outside of higher education while they were students.

" If I present data only on a campus level rather than disaggregating it on the department level, they might say 'that's not true for my department.' "

—Nancy Garrett

Of the Illinois arts and humanities Ph.D. graduates, becoming professors and researchers represented by far the most common career path for these respondents. However, about one-third worked in businesses, professional firms, health agencies, government, and other types of organizations. This finding could have important implications for arts and humanities departments with regard to how they approach career preparation and professional development for doctoral students.

Illinois alumni with Ph.D.s in computer science, engineering, and the natural sciences were more likely to work for a business or professional firm than in an academic setting.

Satisfaction with academic program. UNC respondents expressed strong satisfaction with their overall doctoral experience. Most felt their dissertation work prepared them better than any other aspect of their studies, with their dissertation adviser a close second. Those working in elementary and secondary education rated their UNC classroom instruction higher than did alumni in other employment sectors. These educators, not surprisingly, along with graduates working in higher education, felt that the opportunity to teach while in graduate school was important preparation for their current position. Graduates in the nonprofit sector, along with the self-employed, indicated that internship or practicum experience had offered important preparation.

Illinois graduates likewise were very satisfied with their education and career preparation.

Professional success. One important question for universities is whether the professional success of graduates is related to the quality of their education. For Illinois doctoral graduates, there was a weak correlation between salary and job satisfaction. Salary was also weakly correlated with how well graduates felt that their Illinois doctoral degree had prepared them for their career path in general.

Job satisfaction, however, was related to graduates' perceptions of how well the university prepared them for their jobs and careers. Illinois respondents who reported less satisfaction with the preparation they received for their degrees were also less satisfied with their current jobs. Alumni who were happiest with their jobs were most likely to have positive feelings toward their Illinois education—a finding that may be important for alumni associations.

Conclusions

In areas where the UNC and Illinois surveys overlap, the feedback from doctoral graduates is remarkably consistent. Because we found so few differences in the results, we feel confident in using the findings from both surveys to describe the likely career paths and attitudes of Ph.D. graduates at both institutions. Taken together, the surveys indicate that:

- Most doctoral graduates are finding meaningful employment after graduation, although their career paths are varied and nonlinear.
- Most doctoral graduates of both universities left the state after graduation—reflecting the national job market for people with doctoral degrees.
- A sizable number (53 percent) of graduates of both universities followed "alternative" career paths—even graduates from arts and humanities programs, which can be more focused on preparation for teaching and research careers.
- Unsuccessful job searches for academic positions seem to have led some respondents into the private sector.
- Many graduates, however, had planned for careers in the private sector or government, suggesting that the "alternative" label may be not be appropriate to describe the careers of Ph.D.s who work outside higher education.
- A majority of doctoral graduates in all employment sectors found jobs related to their field of study and to the career for which they had planned when they entered their graduate program. However, 10 percent of Illinois respondents working in the private sector reported that their jobs were unrelated to their Ph.D. field of study—a high proportion considering the time and energy involved in attaining a doctoral degree.
- Overall, graduates of both universities were quite satisfied with their academic experiences. However, those employed within higher education reported greater satisfaction than those working in the private sector. Graduates who work outside higher education appeared to be less satisfied with how their doctoral education prepared them for their current professional positions.
- Most graduates were very satisfied with their jobs, although those in higher education were slightly more satisfied than those in other sectors.
- On average, respondents in the Illinois survey who were working in higher education had the lowest salaries; those in the private sector had the highest salaries.
- Job satisfaction also related to how well Illinois respondents rated the university in preparing them for their careers. Those who were happiest with their career preparation in graduate school reported the most satisfaction with their jobs. (This finding does not demonstrate a causal link, however.)

Action Steps

- Graduate programs may want to redefine their concept of "alternative" careers for doctoral graduates. Because so many Ph.D. graduates were pursuing careers successfully in the private sector, report that their job is related to their field of study, and are relatively happy with the career preparation they received in graduate school, graduate programs do not have to limit their focus to preparing only future university teachers and researchers.
- Graduate programs can improve career advising of all students, especially with regard to careers in the private sector. Expanding leadership, communication, and professional development activities—as well as offering students more exposure to alumni in careers outside of academe—might help in this effort.
- The results of this study can be used to give doctoral students and their professors a realistic assessment of the outcomes of their studies.

We found no evidence that any doctoral graduates from the University of Illinois or the University of North Carolina are driving taxis. Instead, they enter into a wide variety of professions. An honest assessment of the prospects for doctoral graduates and a hard look at the goals of doctoral education are the first steps toward improving the climate of graduate education.

Paper 15

Faculty and administrators want to know what kind of impact an institution has on its alumni. Through regular surveys, the State University of New York at Albany has devised a model to let its graduates turn the tables and give the institution a grade. As a result, constructive conversations have blossomed all across the campus.

Would Alumni Do It All Again?

Influences on Alumni Willingness to Attend the Same Institution, Select the Same Major, and Enter the Same Career

J. Fredericks Volkwein
Director of Institutional Research and Associate Professor
State University of New York at Albany
and
Fuqin Bian
Research Associate
State University of New York at Albany

Would alumni do it all over again? That is, would they attend the same institution? Select the same major? Enter the same career? The State University of New York at Albany periodically polls its alumni to find out, asking them a wide variety of questions about precollege traits and postcollege educational and occupational experiences. This polling gives alumni a chance to evaluate their undergraduate education and its impact on their lives.

To help in the assessment, Albany has devised an outcomes model—a hybrid of widely recognized research and theory in the field (Figure 8-1). This model guides us in posing research questions and measuring the responses.

In our model, educational outcomes (such as intellectual growth, academic achievement, satisfaction, and persistence) are products of a variety of student traits, precollege characteristics,

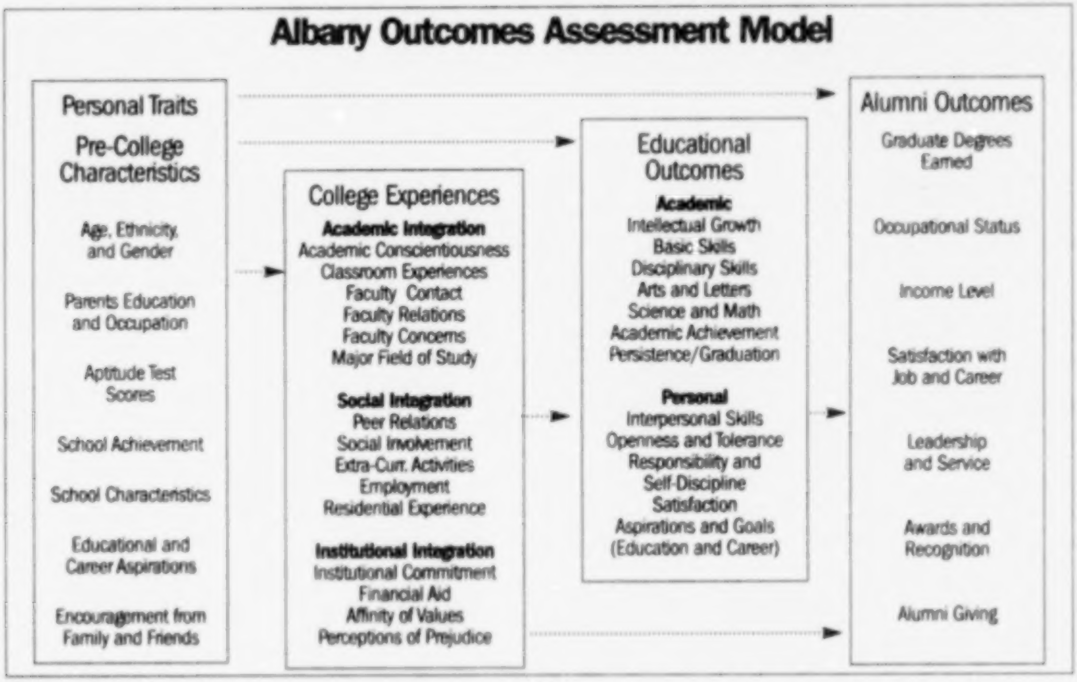
Albany Outcomes Assessment Model
Personal Traits
Pre-College Characteristics
Age, Ethnicity, and Gender
Parents Education and Occupation
Aptitude Test Scores
School Achievement
School Characteristics
Educational and Career Aspirations
Encouragement from Family and Friends
College Experiences
Academic Integration
Academic Conscientiousness
Classroom Experiences
Faculty Contact
Faculty Relations
Faculty Concerns
Major Field of Study
Social Integration
Peer Relations
Social Involvement
Extra-Curr. Activities
Employment
Residential Experience
Institutional Integration
Institutional Commitment
Financial Aid
Affinity of Values
Perceptions of Prejudice
Educational Outcomes
Academic
Intellectual Growth
Basic Skills
Disciplinary Skills
Arts and Letters
Science and Math
Academic Achievement
Persistence/Graduation
Personal
Interpersonal Skills
Openness and Tolerance
Responsibility and Self-Discipline
Satisfaction
Aspirations and Goals (Education and Career)
Alumni Outcomes
Graduate Degrees Earned
Occupational Status
Income Level
Satisfaction with Job and Career
Leadership and Service
Awards and Recognition
Alumni Giving

Figure 8-1

and college experiences. Likewise, alumni outcomes (such as advanced degrees, occupational status, and career satisfaction) result from a variety of earlier experiences. Some of these outcomes derive from the student's background; others result from the influences and outcomes of an education at Albany.

The Survey at a Glance

Purpose: To track the following key measures and to examine the relationships among them:

- precollege characteristics, including high school achievement, ethnicity, and parents' education (as a proxy for socioeconomic status, which is otherwise difficult to measure);
- letter grades (A through E) that we ask alumni to give to Albany and to their major departments;
- estimates of the growth and skill development that alumni attribute to the Albany experience (covering about 40 cognitive and social areas);
- effectiveness ratings for many aspects of the curriculum, the major department, and Albany as a whole;
- postcollege achievements in terms of earned degrees, income, job satisfaction, and honors; and
- bottom-line outcomes expressing alumni willingness to attend Albany "all over again," select the same major, and enter the same career.

Method: The survey was sent to 4,000 Albany alumni who were 10 years out or more. Using descriptive data statistics and data reduction techniques, we reduced the 120-item survey to 30 scales and items that are most relevant to the willingness of alumni to "do it all over again." We then analyzed the strength of the association among all of these measures.

Response rate: We received 1,700 usable responses to a mail survey (40 percent response rate).

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Highlights of the Findings

Descriptive analysis

Grading the undergraduate experience. We asked alumni to grade their major departments (as well as Albany as a whole) on a number of dimensions, using an A (4) though E (0) scale. Then we calculated a grade point average (G.P.A.) for the university and for each department.

Alumni gave the best grades to the quality of instruction in their major (3.2) and to instruction at Albany in general (3.1). Respondents gave their departments fairly high marks (2.8 to 2.9) for faculty availability outside of class, overall quality of student life, faculty respect for students, and preparation for graduate school. The lowest grades for the departments (2.3 to 2.6) went to the quality of academic advising, faculty interest in student development, and career preparation. Generally, respondents marked their major departments higher than they did the university as a whole.

Growth and skill development. Faculty and staff are very interested in how alumni rate Albany's contributions to their intellectual, personal, and social growth. Most respondents (65 to 69 percent) rated those contributions as high (4 and 5 on a five-part scale); only 4 to 11 percent rated those contributions as low (1 and 2).

Abilities and skills important to success in their lives and careers. On the personal and intellectual side, of the skills they learned mostly as a result of their academic experience, 96 percent of the respondents rated two skills as highly important or essential: functioning independently without supervision and exercising personal responsibility. Next came, in descending order (93 percent to 75 percent):

- listening effectively,
- exercising self-discipline,
- exercising problem-solving skills,
- maintaining openness to new ideas,
- thinking analytically and logically,
- acquiring new skill and knowledge on one's own,
- possessing clear goals,
- writing effectively, and
- learning how to learn.

On the interpersonal side (skills learned mostly as a result of the experience outside the classroom), the top ratings were, in descending order (90 to 75 percent):

- speaking effectively,
- evaluating and choosing between alternative courses of action,
- coping with conflict,
- understanding oneself,
- leading and supervising tasks and groups of people, and
- functioning effectively as a member of a team.

Effectiveness of Albany's preparation of graduates. Overall, alumni indicated that their undergraduate experience at Albany was effective in preparing them for graduate school and employment: 59 percent rated preparation for graduate school highly effective (rating of 4 or 5), and 52 percent rated preparation for employment as highly effective.

Career satisfaction. This measure is perhaps the most important postcollege outcome. Our analysis of their responses (using 5-point scales on how satisfied alumni are) looked at:

- "intrinsic rewards" (intellectual challenge, feelings of accomplishment, autonomy, creativity, and interest in work), and
- "extrinsic rewards" (salary, work conditions, job security, and social status).

Alumni were more satisfied with their careers in terms of intrinsic rewards; those 25 years out were most satisfied intrinsically and least satisfied extrinsically.

The bottom line. In response to our big three questions, most degree recipients would still choose to attend Albany again (66 percent), select the same major (54 percent), and pursue the same career (58 percent). Those with congruent majors and careers were significantly more likely to select the same major (61 percent) and same career (62 percent).

Multivariate Analysis.

In doing the multivariate analysis, we looked at which precollege, college, and postcollege variables have the most important influence on alumni opinions.

Willingness to attend the same institution again. The results clearly suggest that this measure was significantly influenced by the vitality of students' academic experiences, especially in their undergraduate major, combined with their perceived personal growth. These results have implications for the undergraduate curriculum, for enrollment management, and for alumni development.

Willingness to select the same major again. Here, the unity and breadth of the curriculum and the major's perceived contribution to graduate school, life, and career were strongly associated with alumni willingness to study the same subject again.

Willingness to enter the same career again. Postcollege variables outweighed other variables here. Alumni responses indicated that effectiveness of the curriculum and major, gaining interpersonal skills, preparing for graduate school, and being male are significantly associated with willingness to enter the same career all over again.

In summary, the undergraduate experience was most influential in alumni willingness to attend the institution again and study the same major. Precollege and postcollege experiences had a relatively minor influence on these attitudes. With regard to the decision to select a career, however, postcollege variables exerted a great influence, with college experiences having a significant but lesser role.

> **"You don't need to do certain alumni studies more than once every four or five years. If you're doing a survey every year, and reporting the results every year, it gets to be ho-hum. Attitudes change very slowly over a long period if time—unless you're in a state of financial catastrophe."**
>
> —J. Fredericks Volkwein

Action Steps

- We have widely distributed our findings to executive committees, governing bodies, and alumni groups (including publishing articles in the alumni magazine). The Office of Institutional Research gave each academic department a summary of responses from its alumni.
- The research has stimulated an array of campus conversations and actions. Some departments were surprised by their relatively low ratings and engaged in spirited debates about the accuracy of the findings. Others have been galvanized into taking corrective actions, in some cases led by faculty who commented that they "knew all along" how mediocre that undergraduate major was but needed tangible reinforcement.
- Perhaps the most constructive discussions on campus have been stimulated by the "abilities and skills" ratings. Faculty have joined with students and staff to examine the ways we might help students acquire these important life skills.
- One of our most significant findings concerned the importance of college experiences compared to precollege ones. What happens to students after they are on the campus is far more consequential than the baggage they bring with them. These findings also provide a helpful context for discussions about academic advising, student services, general education, and residential life, as well as alumni relations.
- The self-reflective atmosphere has produced an array of recent changes in undergraduate education, including:
  - greater faculty interest in student retention and subsequent alumni support;
  - changes in the orientation program (more attention to academic rather than social adjustment);
  - discussions about the skills students learn in their majors, especially writing, speaking, coping with conflict, problem-solving, and teamwork;
  - improvements in the undergraduate curriculum;
  - establishment of residential living-learning communities;
  - greater attention to excellence in teaching and learning; and
  - enhanced administrative decision-making and strategic planning. We now have visible results to support funding initiatives.

For some academic departments, the data have led to quiet self-renewal and enhancement of programs and policies. Perhaps the greatest value of these survey results has been the constructive conversations being held all across a complex university.

Response from Lynn Rothstein

Vice President for Research and Planning
Union Theological Seminary

The papers suggested to me three areas for discussion—areas that are important to the part of my work that involves institutional research:

- **Alumni research and models at the graduate level.** One graduate project mentioned in the Illinois/UNC study is the Ph.D.s 10-years-out project, which is endorsed by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and funded by the Mellon Foundation. The report, which will be ready in about a year, will be an informative work across disciplines and institutions. Those of us in disciplines not represented will need to take the next step, however. That project will be limited to Ph.D.s only; we have a need for broader graduate-level analysis at the master's level as well.

  The Illinois/UNC paper draws a conclusion that I find particularly important, and it parallels a conclusion in the Albany paper. Garrett and Hoeflich say that "programs may want to redefine their concept of 'alternative careers' for doctoral graduates." The Albany paper brings up the issues of preparing students for jobs and careers vs. graduate and professional school.

  A model of research at the graduate level is going to need to take on this challenge of the duality and tension within our programs. In my own doctoral area of psychology, we can be trained as clinicians or as teachers/researchers, and I'm sure there are other graduate programs that can serve as examples of this duality of mission.

  The graduate-level model will also need to take on what the CGS refers to as the new demographics of graduate students: women, age 31, with children. At Union Theological, we would add that our demographic profile over a number of years includes women over 40 with grown children. These students clearly are second-career "students" with a wealth of knowledge upon entering graduate school.
- **The major role that accountability plays in accreditation—regionally and specialized—regarding outcomes assessment.** I would like to hear more about the distribution of information and actions at the governing board level and how at the graduate level we can develop an ongoing discussion with the accrediting agencies (such as Middle States) so that their undergraduate outcomes assessment model better reflects graduate-level programs and analyses.
- **The strategy for external funding of graduate-level alumni research.** At Union Theological, we received foundation funding to develop questionnaires for entering and exiting students to be used by the 200-plus theological schools. We have a proposal ready for the development of an alumni questionnaire. Working collaboratively across institutions, across disciplines, and—as suggested by this conference—across administrative areas is an opportunity we need to explore further.

Response from Kyle Hoffman

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Alumni and Constituent Relations
University of California, Riverside

Rather than presenting formal comments, Hoffman led a Q&A session with the panelists. Before beginning, he noted, "I've been in alumni relations for 14 years, the most recent nine at UC-Riverside. Going back to Fred Volkwein's question: Yes, I would do it all over again."

Q&A

Would you discuss the notion of underemployment? I've used the concept of in-scope and out-of-scope employment.

Nancy Garrett: We actually just asked, "Do you consider yourself underemployed in your current job?" We had several follow-up questions. It's a really tricky thing to measure. What were the problems you encountered?

Now that I understand underemployment as "not being paid enough," I'm surprised it wasn't higher! Fred, you had said you did not observe a relationship between a student's social background and the outcome variables you constructed. What I'm curious about is whether you observed a relationship between social background and elements of the educational experience. We recently completed the base year of a longitudinal study of high school seniors across 34 Minnesota public high schools, and that relationship between the high school experience and parental socioeconomic status is striking; it's very strong.

J. Fredericks Volkwein: We've consistently found a lack of relationship between a student's socioeconomic status when they enter college and their outcomes—it's been 5 percent of the variance explained. Race, ethnicity, and test scores have very little to do with subsequent outcomes. We have found that high school G.P.A. is related to college G.P.A. If you want to predict college G.P.A., you look at high school G.P.A.

When you do a study, and you collect all the information you're going to collect, you have stopped time, you have frozen the situation. We all know that time does not stop and situations are not frozen. Those of us in policy situations need to develop programs that go beyond the status quo. I'm a Ph.D. You look at it as a union card. What if tenure disappears tomorrow?

Garrett: That's one of the real valuable aspects of collecting survey data every year; we do have the possibility of doing longitudinal analysis. That is one of our best ways of predicting what is going to happen in the future. When we survey people 10 years after graduation, conditions are really different now. So in a sense we're always collecting historical data .

Volkwein: This is something we worry about a lot. Having trend data over time is quite valuable. The tough thing is that if you survey the same people very often, you will wear them out. They stop responding. They get saturated with surveys. We're already seeing that in our undergraduate population. We're hoping we can avoid it with our alumni. What we've started doing instead is asking respondents how much their opinion has changed since they graduated.

How do you characterize how much of an impact you really have?

Volkwein: We broke the data out by academic department and shared it with the departments. We could put them into three categories. The first third were departments where the data had an electrifying impact and touched off all kinds of spirited debates about the curriculum and healthy changes in their undergraduate and graduate programs. So the research led to some enduring changes in the way they treated their students, the way they handled advisement, the structure of the curriculum. At the other end of the continuum were the one-third that absolutely ignored it, even resisted discussing it. In the middle were departments that looked at the data, took it seriously, had conversations—but it didn't have a huge impact.

Nancy, how have your survey results been shared, and what have the reactions been?

Garrett: We give each department a department-level report. We disaggregate by degree level, but the data for the graduate degrees, especially the Ph.D.s, tends to be so small—one or two respondents per department per year—that it hasn't been used as much at the graduate level. This paper is actually an effort to use the data we have.

Ideas from Participants

Prizes: Some departments or services on campus may be willing to donate cash prizes for a lottery for respondents, to help increase response rate (one school's auxiliary services donated three $100 prizes).

Follow up: Ask those to whom you distributed survey data what they did with the results.

CHAPTER 9

Parting Thoughts from Five Participants

After devoting two days to discussing research, the alumni and institutional research practitioners weren't at all surprised to find conference evaluation forms on the tables at the concluding lunch. (One speaker told guests how to deal with the fact that an important demographic question inadvertently had been left off the evaluation form: whether their affiliation was with CASE or AIR).

In summing up his thoughts on how this pioneer conference went and what the next steps would be, CASE president Eustace Theodòre noted that he and Terrence Russell, AIR executive director, would be the "bookends" of the luncheon's five speakers.

In Conclusion…

A Tango of Two Groups

Remarks by Eustace Theodore
CASE President

Those of you who know me well—and I would count in that group my Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE) brothers and sisters and those in the alumni profession elsewhere—know that this meeting is a signal event for me. It is the culmination of a plan that was very much in place as I stepped into the CASE presidency in October 1997, for research and information are the basis of any sound profession. The profession of advancement must have a strong research base if we are to move forward, and CASE is committed to helping develop that strong base.

As Larry Litten told you, planning for this conference began publicly before he and I talked, but it certainly took off during the time in which I served as the alumni director at Yale University. With my arrival in Washington, the commitment of CASE to the research enterprise has became of paramount importance in what we do as your professional association.

Metaphors or pictures are very much the way I think, so I will offer two as a way of understanding what has just occurred and what the future may hold.

First picture: The past two days have been a little bit like an embassy party. I remember in particular a party given by a South American embassy at which the Latin American tango was danced. The Latin American tango is what happens when you put Latin Americans and North Americans together in the same room. The comfort distance for North Americans is about two feet, and the comfort distance for South Americans is about one foot. The two move in a tango as each tries to achieve its comfort zone. The North Americans back up, the South Americans move forward. When they reach a wall, they turn around and move in the opposite direction.

"In the past two days we have seen two very different groups—with very different comfort levels, with very different ways of talking and sharing information, but with a common desire to make our educational institutions stronger and better and more productive—do the research tango."

—Eustace Theodore

In the past two days we have seen two very different groups—with very different comfort levels, with very different ways of talking and sharing information, but with a common desire to make our educational institutions stronger and better and more productive—do the research tango. What we have done, and what we need to do more consciously is to learn more about one another's language and the way we think about data and research and to use the things that did not go well in this first dance as a learning experience for future conferences.

Second picture: "This is Joe, I'm coming to you from the year 2001. Somebody was real smart back there in 1998 and started the Roth IRA. It's really great…I'm drawing on it and not paying anything in taxes."

What is it going to be like in the year 2001 when we look back on 1998 and reflect on what we did at this conference? Perhaps Jerold Pearson [of Stanford] will be arriving at the fourth CASE/AIR conference where he will greet Rena Glickstein [of Georgia Tech], congratulating her on surviving in their unique positions—neither institutional research nor alumni relations professionals, but professionals who do market research within alumni relations and/or development operations. They will say, "Isn't it great to be here at the second alumni/AIR conference?" This first conference brought together people in one of the three disciplines of advancement. I hope the second conference in alumni relations three years hence will be different in the following ways:

- It will focus on pure alumni relations research (which does not exclude fund raising but looks at support in a broader way).
- It will draw upon research coming from the brothers and sisters of Jerold and Rena whom we as alumni relations and advancement professionals have been smart enough to hire.
- It will use a language in which the AIR people and the CASE people have more in common than they do today—a language that unifies some of the values and attitudes.

How is that to happen? What I propose is that we put together a CASE/AIR seminar each spring. The next one will be on research dealing with communications issues as they affect our profession of advancement and our institutions. [Editor's Note: This second conference was held March 29-30, 1999]. Two years hence, we will do a conference on development, and then we will begin the cycle again.

Each time, CASE will produce an action-oriented set of proceedings—a document that will be available to small schools and to complex research institutions alike. We will then have a document available to the entire profession; all of you have created such a document as a result of your participation in this first conference. In the year 2001, we will look back on this conference as the beginning of an advancement series with a life you just experienced, as well as a life in print that will go beyond what you have experienced. For that, the entire profession is grateful.

When I was an alumni director and asked that this research program be supported by CASE, the person who caught that idea and made it happen was Paul Chewning, CASE's vice president for professional development. Paul has always done a masterful job of taking an idea and making it a reality. All credit is due to Joe Pettit, to Larry Litten, to Paul, though I know they will try to give the credit to many others. It is a very exciting moment for all of us. I almost feel we should go out and take a team picture. You are going to want to remember that you were wise enough to be here when this happened.

A Map Through the Minefield

Remarks by William J. Evitts

Executive Director, Alumni Relations

State University of New York at Buffalo

Of the 16 papers presented at this conference, only one or two were presented by alumni professionals. For the most part, systematized research that involves alumni relations is being done by institutional research people and not by alumni relations people. We do some research, but it tends to be self-referent and not nearly at the level of rigor and standards that IR people do. We need to wake up to the fact that there is research going on out there—to a degree greater than we even suspected—that involves alumni, that is important to alumni relations, and that is going on without, for the most part, the involvement of alumni relations professionals.

> **"When we set the agenda for what we're going to do in concert in the future, the critical issues will be how and who, because we come from slightly different angles—which is exactly where our strength is."**
> —William J. Evitts

Establishing conversations between the two trades is going to help everybody. The benefits of this interaction for alumni relations are fairly clear: much better data and information, and a map to this minefield that we walk through all the time. The benefits to IR are less clear to me. When we opened that dialogue at our lunch table, somebody in IR said, "I think it's the other way around. I know what we're going to get, but I wasn't sure it was going to be any good to you guys."

We do understand where we overlap and where we don't. For the most part, the ends of our research are different, our missions are rather different, our office cultures are very different. So how should we carry on this important dialogue, this relationship? Is it necessary to come together in face-to-face meetings? I don't think so. When we set the agenda for what we're going to do in concert in the future, the critical issues will be how and who, because we come from slightly different angles—which is exactly where our strength is.

Those of us in alumni relations talk to each other all the time. We end up with hemophilia and an extra toe because the gene pool in alumni relations is small. This conference is a good reminder that outside of our box, there is a lot of room where we ought to be thinking. We will probably make mistakes, but as someone said, "The trick is, when you make a mistake, the next time you are going to make a much better mistake."

A Bridge to Communication

Remarks by Susan Dolbert

Executive Director, Alumni Association

Arizona State University

Alumni relations research tends to focus on two areas currently. The first area relates to fund raising and how alumni affect fund raising. We all have financial pressures at our institutions, as well as a lot of interest from our CEOs about fund raising. The second factor is that the alumni research presented seems to focus predominately on future and current students and what alumni can tell us that will help us look at those issues. The research isn't really about things that we as alumni professionals are interested in, such as how can we better serve those alumni in many constituent groups. That's something to think about and to take upon ourselves. On what issues can we work with IR—those in which we have a particular interest but don't appear to be as represented in the current research?

Alumni professionals are taking several lessons from this meeting. The first lesson is to recognize the value and importance of research. All of us were reminded of that lesson as we heard about the important work that many of the IR folks are doing, as well as the importance of good research. As Bill Evitts indicated, sometimes we do our own stuff, and we do it as cheaply and quickly as we can. All of us realize that we need to work better with our institutional researchers and that we can get first-quality, affordable research by working cooperatively with them.

At our table, one possibility we discussed for future meetings was developing a session on the various cooperative models on our campuses between IR and alumni. One alumni office may use the campus IR department as a consultant and then contract with an outside firm. On another campus, the two offices might be fully integrated and actually go out and conduct the research.

How do we continue this dialogue and these conversations? We all saw that there really needs to be a bridge between the communication arms of IR and alumni. One way might be to share articles—in CURRENTS in research publications, in newsletters, or in electronic versions.

We might start the next research conference with a session in which we establish baselines. In which areas do we have an interest, and what are the common definitions?

I hope that we will always focus on linkages. How do we view what we're doing in an integrated fashion? Much of the research directed toward future and current students can also be useful for many other areas. Student indebtedness is one example. Research on that topic is very useful for an institution in the broad sense; it's also very useful for financial officers, for financial aid, for tuition-setting, for all kinds of things, as well as for alumni satisfaction and future alumni giving. I want to stress that we should try to think more broadly than simply doing IR for a specific client.

> **"As one paper noted, alumni are the only constituency that can determine if curricula or programs have the ability to weather the test of time. It's important for all of us to realize that alumni represent an important focus for research."**
>
> —Susan Dolbert

What I would call the alumni advantage is another factor I want to preach about to the IR people. It is important to survey alumni and to involve them in research. As one paper noted, alumni are the only constituency that can determine if curricula or programs have the ability to weather the test of time. It's important for all of us to realize that alumni represent an important focus for research.

Throughout the meeting, I could see in action the finding that alumni are a very credible voice, that alumni survey results are respected and valued. We don't always find that attitude in the things we do.

In the future, I hope there will be fewer missed opportunities on our campuses. For IR, working with academic affairs or student affairs might involve identifying commonalities with alumni needs. For alumni offices, it might mean sharing survey results in alumni magazines, or on Web pages, or in other electronic media. Arizona State University's alumni magazine, which next year will come out six times for 170,000 alumni, is an opportunity to share the kinds of research findings that are really important to the institution and can really demonstrate not only who we are but where we're going.

An Opportunity for IR

Remarks by Mary Sapp

Director, Planning and Institutional Research

University of Miami

and AIR President

My comments focus on three differences between the conference we've been attending for the past two days and the kinds of conferences people in AIR normally attend.

The first and most obvious difference is in the participants. We are accustomed to much more homogeneous conferences. Having individuals from both AIR and CASE is a new kind of environment and opens new kinds of opportunities to learn more about each other and to engage in dialogue. This diversity encourages what Dan Heinlen calls the WENTOT ("We never thought of that") phenomenon. Someone raised the question at our table about what institutional researchers would get out of this. In terms of IR's interactions with individuals from the alumni offices on our campuses, I came up with five things:

- This is an opportunity for new clients. We all feel we have full plates, so this isn't always greeted with open arms. The reality, however, is that alumni and advancement offices will be our clients in the future, and it's always good to find out about your clients.
- When we do research for various individuals around the university, those of us who want to make the research as relevant as possible always start out by asking questions about what it is going to be used for. What's the purpose? What do you want to accomplish with it? The more we find out about our clients (their goals, issues, questions, and concerns), the better our research will be. This conference was a bit of an eye-opener for some people who had tended to view university advancement as a monolith. There really are differences between alumni officers and development officers. The alumni people are very interested in long-term relationships with the alums and not just the short-term—and not just in asking them for money. One of the points that came out is the need for longitudinal and comparative data.
- We are already collecting survey data from alumni, and the more we understand this population, the better the research will be. Having the opportunity to hear from people who work with alumni on a day-to-day basis gives us insights that should help us develop better surveys and to make better use of them.
- For us, IR is an art, not a science, so we always enjoy the opportunity to listen to research from other places. This process gives us ideas for improving methodology and effectively presenting our results. One of the lessons we have learned this year is that this is not an AIR conference. Future sessions should focus less on methodological concerns and more on applications and uses, recognizing that there are other people in the audience who frankly don't care about some of the issues that people in IR find absolutely fascinating.
- IR offices do have access to data that would be useful for alumni offices to pass on to their alums. But alumni relations people also have information and other resources that would be very useful to us, including databases that would enrich our research, especially with the current emphasis on outcomes.

A second kind of difference in this conference involves the format. In the research conferences I go to, presenters have 50 minutes for a paper, with five minutes of discussion, or an hour and 15 minutes for a panel discussion, again with a very short period for discussion at the end. The format that we used here—very short presentations of papers, followed by two discussants and a lot of time for reaction—was very effective. I have to admit I was a little concerned about allowing presenters only 15 minutes per paper. Having the papers in advance really made a big difference, however, and the format worked very well. One of the presenters said to me, "This is fun!" Getting more feedback from the audience is fun for a presenter. For people in the audience, it's also more fun to be a more active participant.

The third difference is in the results from the conference. Normally we go to conferences and take papers home with us, and that's the end of it. Here there is potential for follow-up. The publications are the most obvious. Summarizing themes, as we are doing in this session, is something we should do more often. There was some discussion about the possibility of putting the results of surveys on the Web, as well as summaries of the sessions, perhaps. One limitation is that this AIR/CASE conference involved only a small group. There are other individuals who do research on alumni, so having the results of this conference available will help others as well. Another possibility is inviting teams of people from institutions as a way of helping to build bridges. As an outcome of this conference, we have talked about the "marriage of the organizations," but we also need to have more of a marriage within our own institutions that will lead us to more integrated research, more powerful research—with more powerful results.

> **"Future sessions should focus less on methodological concerns and more on applications and uses, recognizing that there are other people in the audience who frankly don't care about some of the issues that people in IR find absolutely fascinating."**
>
> —Mary Sapp

A Cross-Cultural Exchange

Remarks by Terrence Russell

AIR Executive Director

Mary Sapp called this a different sort of meeting, and Eustace Theodore had a metaphor for it. I was thinking of another analogy that's more to the point in describing our usual AIR meetings: the cruise ship, where passengers spend four days locked up in a windowless room and see the same people over and over again. It's been a little different at this meeting. I suspect the two-day format is a welcome relief as well.

I want to thank Larry Litten and Joe Pettit and Paul Chewning not only for putting this conference on but for developing it essentially from whole cloth. As executive director, I don't often get a call from someone saying, "How would you like to cosponsor something we've already got planned?" Being relatively bright, I said, "Yes, I think that's a wonderful idea."

Let me talk about what I learned here. One of the fascinating aspects of this conference is the cross-cultural exchange that's taken place. Part of the lesson comes from what it says about the "other," but part of it is what one learns about oneself and one's own practice. I'd like to take a distinctly nonquantitative look at the research presented here and make some observations about what that research says about not only alumni research but about alumni affairs and institutional research.

The first thing I learned is that people in IR may be just a little bit imperialistic in calling what we do institutional research when it looks as if we're doing primarily academic affairs and student affairs research. Certainly there's a broader area here, and we're seeing the possibilities of extending those research opportunities within the institution. Whether that's done by one central office or is distributed is irrelevant. We're seeing that kind of agenda becoming more important to other sectors of a college or university.

My second point is that although we're surrounded here by alumni professionals, there seems to be an enormous controversy regarding the social role of alumni. A few of those roles came through in the papers and discussions:

- Because IR folks have tended to use IR for program assessment, we have focused on alumni as consumers of a past product. How far in the past is a matter of variation.
- We've focused on alumni as products, for example, when we asked employers how good our alumni are.
- When the alumni affairs folks look at the issue, they see some other social roles: alumni as consumers of alumni products and services, as marketing targets, as donors, as members of the alumni association.
- An older role occurred to me: alumni as patrons. The notion of patron involves a long-term commitment to support the institution not only financially but also in terms of all the things we expect from involved alumni who are going to be advocates for the institution.

Research in alumni relations could explore each of those roles, or facets of that alumni role, not only to improve the practice of alumni affairs but also to improve the fortunes of the institutions turning out these alumni.

Aside from methodological sophistication and computer technology, most of these papers probably could have been written anywhere in the past 20 or 30 years because the academy hasn't changed that much in that length of time. As everyone in the higher education business seems to tell us, however, we are entering a period in which things are changing incredibly rapidly. This situation leads us to consider, in terms of the research, how we deal with alumni and what the new alumni roles will be. In distance learning, for example—with projects like the Western Governors' University—what does that mean about the concept of being an alum? Is there a new social role here? As Bill Colburn [University of Connecticut] mentioned, when we cut loose the ties of time and space, what happens to the alumni role, and how do we engineer a program for people who don't have those kind of ties? Are there models apart from higher education that we could use for people who are not tied to time and space? One that occurred to me is one Microsoft uses: the user group. Maybe we're looking forward to a future network of user groups out there.

"What does this rapid institutional change mean for the utility of alumni surveys?"
—Terrence Russell

It also is clear that there are some dilemmas. Call one of these dilemmas the conflicting ends of research: on the one hand is consumer research done by academic affairs or alumni affairs, and on the other hand, research necessary for fund raising. What happens when those two get conflated, and the messages get confused? It's very difficult as more and more folks do research for more and more purposes, and they all start to contact alumni. There have to be ways of keeping those messages clear.

The other dilemma is this: What does this rapid institutional change mean for the utility of alumni surveys? It's one thing to be doing research on alumni who graduated 10 or 15 years ago when the outcomes we're looking for aren't going to show for 10 or 15 years. That works fine as long as the program is pretty stable. What happens in a time of very rapid program change? These are questions for which there probably is no determinate answer; we're going to have to think through these issues.

What can we do? What specifically can AIR and CASE do? I wish I could answer those dilemmas. Eustace Theodore has laid out the program for the next three years regarding the areas we can explore. Some other suggestions undoubtedly will get moved into the format:

- a preconference workshop in which we have a cross-cultural exchange, a bartering of trinkets, a trading of metaphors and idioms; and
- a seminar format, so that participants don't have to stand in front of a microphone, in front of the tribunal, to ask questions.

Our two organizations can work hard to figure out how to organize the on-campus partnerships necessary for this work to have any impact. I feel very strongly that these partnerships will come about and that they will look quite different across different types of institutions. In some places, the IR shop will embrace alumni folks with open arms to help with all of their surveying and research concerns, to supply them with the analysts and the technology and the time to do that—in their dreams! Unfortunately, the reality is, as one IR director said to me, "Are these people going to show up on my doorstep? I don't have time for this!"

There are a number of ways of accomplishing this partnering. One is for alumni professionals to think of how they might start to develop their own kind of research activity. In a sense, IR people are doomed to relive, for better or worse, the dictum of Philip Hart (the ex-senator from Michigan) that "in Washington you can get anything done that you want, as long as you don't take credit for it." IR has been very good at that approach. I suppose we'll continue to hone that skill.

One of the concrete things we can talk about is money. AIR has received a grant from the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Science Foundation to give grants for research involving federal databases. Some of these databases would be of great to use in alumni research. AIR will fund grants for up to $30,000 and two years.

AIR offers fully funded institutes on using these databases, with presentations by the staff and project officers who developed them. The AIR institute program would be enormously useful for anyone considering development of a research capability in their shop or figuring out how to use the IR office; although this program is not fully funded, it is relatively inexpensive. Our basic institute in August is aimed at people who don't have a strong quantitative background who want to understand how IR works and how they can use it. We also have institutes on advanced statistics and information technology.

That's what I learned, and I hope you all learned at least that much. See you next year!

Research in Alumni Relations

Put survey research to work to improve your alumni programs. Get to know what your alumni think, how they rate your offerings, and what new services they might want. With a solid base of research, you'll be able to assess what works, and where to make improvements. This new book brings you cutting-edge data from the first-ever conference of survey researchers and alumni relations practitioners. This historic gathering was the 1998 Association for Institutional Research AIR/CASE Alumni Research Conference, held at Georgetown University. With the 16 examples of alumni relations research presented, you can make helpful comparisons and determine the best research strategies for improving your programs.

> "As one paper noted, alumni are the only constituency that can determine if curricula or programs have the ability to weather the test of time. It's important for all of us to realize that alumni represent an important focus for research."

—from the In Conclusion section, remarks by Susan Dolbert, Executive Director, Alumni Association, Arizona State University

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